

# Flandre's Big Adventure

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Flandre Scarlet has always wanted to experience the outside world for herself. Locked away for most of her life because of her unpredictable nature, Flandre grows bored of the same thing until one night, she slips away from the mansion. Along the way she meets the various inhabitants of Gensokyo while both causing and getting caught up in troublesome situations.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2011-02-24

Updated: 2015-09-15

Words: 192517

Chapters: 37

Rated: Fiction K+ - Language: English - Genre: Adventure/Fantasy -  
Characters: Cirno, Flandre S. - Reviews: 103 - Favs: 141 - Follows: 137

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/6774061/1/Flandre-s-Big-Adventure>

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# The Great Escape

The burning sun was just beginning to set over the horizon. Darkness had waited long enough and was staking its claim over the land. The tall opulent towers of the Scarlet Devil Mansion were bathed in shadows as the sunlight slowly faded away, growing fainter with each passing moment. Inside the mansion, many fairy maids looked outside the windows, noticing the rapidly escaping daylight.

This spurred them into action. They hurriedly prepared for Remilia Scarlet's awakening by laying dining wear, dusting curtains and laying out freshly ironed clean clothing. However she wasn't the only resident that the fairies attentively prepared for. Deep within the gothic looking mansion, Remilia's younger sister twisted and turned in her bed, kicking her bed covers restlessly. Dreams of the coming night flashed through her anxious mind. Her bedroom was located right in the depths of the mansion. Deeper than the well stocked wine cellar, even deeper than Patchouli's vast library full of forbidden knowledge. It had been situated there for a very good reason.

Flandre Scarlet yawned lazily. Her eyelids flickered uncertainly as she thought about returning to sleep but as soon as her hazy brain woke up enough to remind her what was going to happen today she kicked off her crimson bed covers along with a stuffed teddy bear that had been innocently resting alongside her. She stood, stretching her arms high above her head before letting out a sleepy yawn. *Ah, such a refreshing sleep*, thought Flandre. I'll need all my boundless energy tonight for sure! She grinned, a big beaming smile as she rustled under her pillow and produced a set of keys which she had 'borrowed' from one of the maids the previous night.

*Tonight was the night! The night that I finally leave the mansion!*

She could hardly contain her excitement as she quickly changed out of her lavish nightclothes and lovingly brushed her golden locks with her favourite ivory comb. Next, she selected a clean and freshly

ironed dress from her dresser unit and put it on while humming to herself, bobbing her head along with the tune. Her room was filled with antique furniture and a large luxury bed. A richly decorated fireplace sat against one wall, devoid of flames. An assortment of random toys, mostly broken in some way, littered the floor. Several shelves hung on the wall filled with tattered books that she had already read. Most of them had been liberated from the dusty old magic library. Flandre didn't feel guilty at all about it as Patchouli always hogged all the books to herself. Her recent reading craze had only helped to fuel her interest for the outside world.

She danced over to the door and stole a quick look outside. The hallway was completely empty besides the flickering candle light that bathed everything in a ghostly glow. Flandre giggled again, smirking at her brilliant plan. The basement had long since become too confined for her and was no fun whatsoever. The same hallways and faces greeted her every time she opened her eyes. The same food. The same games. You can only experience the same feelings to many times before they become totally monotonous. Playing pranks on the fairy maids only went so far nowadays.

Flandre closed her ruby red eyes, let out a breath and concentrated. Her brow furrowed as she mentally went about her preparations. Her scarlet dress fluttered as if caught in a breeze as strange and wonderfully colourful energies swirled around her legs. Breathing became harder as the magical patterns grew in length and intensity which in turn made the air denser around Flandre as the very air was laced with bewitching power. Her face contorted in an expression of discomfort as a shimmering pink portal appeared over her chest.

Out of this mysterious gateway came a set of pale hands. They grasped around at the edge of the portal, seeking purchase. Flandre winced as sharp nails poked her supple body. *Come on, hurry up*, she willed, not wanting this discomfort to last any longer than necessary. A perfect clone of herself pulled itself away from her in a burst of extraordinary power that sent sparks flying. In the hallway, bright strobing luminescent light was pushed out under the door

which flooded the brooding hallway with a light show which would have alerted the fairies had anybody been there to witness it.

The magically cloned Flandre looked around at its new surroundings, flapping its multicoloured crystal wings as it gathered its bearings. The original Flandre moaned as a wave of dizziness passed over her. *Cloning always leaves me with a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach. It feels like splitting your soul in half.* The clone's gaze finally rested on its master. It was like looking in a perfect mirror. *Ah, she was so cute! Such a beautiful and graceful figure. The only thing more attractive than me is two of me!* Flandre smiled, and the clone copied her expression and mannerisms perfectly as if they were of one mind. Well, that was actually true. They shared a closely formed mental link that allowed Flandre to control her children at will. She jumped to the left and the clone copied her movement without missing a beat.

She pointed at the ceiling with a shocked expression, trying to fool her copy by distracting her as the original Flandre suddenly jumped into the air. She tucked her arms under her head and somersaulted, her body spinning rapidly like a pin-wheel caught in a strong breeze before landing in a perfect crouch. She looked up at the clone as her nimble hand shot out like lightening, grasping her falling hat before it dirtied itself on the floor. The clone was in the exact same position as its master and had executed the same daring acrobatics with effortless ease. Flandre smiled and rose to her feet. She always tried to catch her clones out but they were just too perfect a copy to fool. The twin sisters locked eyes.

"Yeah!", they both said in unison. "Is time to make our escape!" They jumped up and gave each other a mid-air high five with enough force to shake the room with their ear-splitting smack of flesh on flesh. A number of books tumbled noisily off the shelves, hitting the floor in a series of loud thuds. The Flandre's looked at each other nervously and put a finger to their lips. "Shhhhhhhhhh." Flandre watched as the clone hopped over to her bed and started to gather up her night clothing which had been randomly strewn across the bed covers.

"Don't forget mister Teddy," she said as she reached down and picked up the poor stuffed bear. Mr Teddy was missing an eye and one of his furry arms was hanging flimsily from its shoulder. Flandre lovingly hugged Mr Teddy a little bit too tightly, cutting his back with her sharp nails before dropped him at the foot of the bed. Stuffing leaked out of him like falling snowflakes as he bounced about on the squishy mattress before coming to a rest.

"You already know the plan?" she asked the clone. The clone nodded, safely tucked up underneath the bed covers. "I stay in bed, pretending that I'm sick. If anyone knocks on the door I say that I do not want to be disturbed. I wait like this until you return." Flandre nodded. *As expected of my clone. She has mastered her role in its entirety.* Flandre didn't expect any problems. Having the clone repeat its role was more to reassure herself than anything else. Flandre rubbed under her chin, acting like some master detective. *Ah, my plan is foolproof!*

Flandre had made a big fuss about feeling ill in the past couple of days and had stayed in her room for much of the past few nights. She had also made sure to cough and feel her forehead in front of the fairy maids so that they would report her masterful acting back to big sis. She dared not try to fool Remilia directly or she would be exposed faster than Meiling at a poker table. That troublesome head maid, Sakuya, would not be so easily fooled but if she stayed out of her room and left Flandre's meals outside the door like she had requested then it shouldn't be a problem. Hopefully no one would notice she had left the mansion before she eventually returned. With that, Flandre gave the clone a thumbs up which was returned in earnest, and silently left the room.

Like a silent assassin, the little vampire jumped from shadow to shadow, moving fast, almost like a blur. She was the ghost of scarlet manor! She giggled to herself. No one can see me. Sister never let her outside the mansion grounds, not even during the night under supervision. Its just not fair. *I want to feel that excitement again, just like when that interloping red robed miko and thieving witch came*

*crashing into the mansion.* Even though she had eventually been defeated, that little adventure had been the most fun the little vampire had enjoyed in... well forever. *Is the outside world like that? Would I find more wondrous experiences, strong opponents and new friends outside?*

Flandre heard the steady tap tap of footsteps on the cold hard flooring long before their owner had a chance to spot her so before that happened Flandre flew up into the stone rafters. Like a spider eyeing its pray, she watched as two fairy maids walked down the mansion corridor, chatting about the state of the cleaning. Flandre flashed a cruel smile. *No reason I can't have a little fun along the way. The ghost of scarlet manor must be feared!* She grasped the nearest pillar and pulled off a small piece of stone, no larger than a pebble and flicked it at the lead fairy, the one with long blonde hair. It hit her square in the back, right between the wings. "Ouchhh," she winced. "What was that?"

The brown haired fairy look around, her tiny wings fluttering in confusion. Her gaze fell on a piece of stone on the floor which she picked up and started to examine like it would reveal all of its secrets if she only stared long enough. "Looks like someone threw this at you, or it fell from the roofing maybe?" They looked up as one but only the unremarkable ceiling was there to greet them. "That really hurt," blonde grumbled, rubbing her back.

"Well, don't worry about it," her friend urged. "We need to get the dining table ready for the mistress so lets get a move on We don't want to keep her waiting for even a second."

Flandre suppressed a snigger. She already had a second stone fragment in her hand, which she turned around between her long slender fingers, feeling the weight. She threw it behind the maids. It hit the ground, rebounding along it. Mimicking a cricket's hopping. Eerie echoes sounded down the hallway, causing both fairies to jump. Startled, the blonde fairy asked, "What was that?" in a quivering tone. Her friend gripped the hilt of her broom tightly as she looked around nervously.



This is great, Flandre thought. *Nothings better than tormenting some helpless fairies.* Always telling on her when she had some harmless fun. Always telling tails to Sakuya. *Serves you right!* She threw a third rock and aimed her finger at it as it hurtled onwards, like a cowboy in one of her books. She followed it, her faintly glowing red eyes tracking the spinning rock until it was right in front of the unfortunate duo.

"Bang," she whispered. A sound as sharp as a thunderclap filled the fairies ears and rebounded off the walls and flooring, making it come from all directions at once. The rock exploded into a million pieces, sending fragments spinning in every direction. A dust cloud formed, creating a thick dense mist of pulverized rock. The two maids shuffled around in the grey cloud blind and coughing. They were wide eyed and totally terrified and were about to scream when Flandre appeared behind them as if out of nowhere. All the fairies could see were two large glowing red dots. Flandre's gleaming red irises. She could almost taste their fear. It was quite palatable.

"BOOOOOOOOOOOO!" she shouted at the top of her lungs.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" the maids screamed in abject panic. The two fairy maids yelled in terror as loud as they could, tripping over each other in order to escape this unseen nightmarish horror. They were in hysterics. One of them burst into tears while the other dropped her broom as her hands shook uncontrollably.

"What's happening?" the blonde one pleaded as her little wings worked themselves into overdrive, propelling her away down the corridor as fast as possible.

Flandre giggled mischievously before vanishing back into the mansion. *That should keep them on their toes in my absence.* She followed the path that she had planned out beforehand. Down the corridor with the large tasteless picture of some old crumbling castle, next up into the dusty music room with its annoying instruments. She paused and looked at the piano. Such an annoyance, such an

eyesore. If sister ever makes me play that thing again she thought as her hands rose up almost with a will of their own.

She hesitated, her eyes widening. The black piano stared back at her, tempting her. *Sister would be upset if I broke the piano, even if it did produce sounds akin to a tortured cat.* She sighed and continued on her quest for freedom. Maybe another time.

It was pitch black in the attic but a vampires eyes could see into the gloom with little difficulty. Flandre's eyes glowed a dim red as she searched for her super secret stash in a sea of old dusty boxes, cobwebs and forgotten furniture. Her face lit up when she spotted the deep blue crate tucked away in between two moth ridden armchairs. She stuck her arm into it and started to rummage, feeling the shapes with her searching hands. Her face lit up as she felt something soft and pulled it out to examine her prize. It was just a stupid bundle of candles wrapped in a white cloth. Flandre snarled and crushed the collection of wax with but a flinch. They cracked like broken bones between her deceptively powerful fingers.

She dug deeper. *It must be in here, it must be! Could some meddling fairy have moved it? Ah, here we go.* She pulled out a cute little blue carry bag with clouds decorating the sides. Donning the bag, she leapt out up through the hatch and up onto the mansions battlements. The cool icy night air hit her as she emerged out into the night and she relished the feeling despite the chill. She took a deep breath like it would be her last, tasting the sweet taste of midnight. Her wings fanned out behind her as she jumped on top of one of the mansions towers. She hung onto the spire, as still as a stone statue and scanned her surroundings like a hawk. Several other tall towers loomed large in the horizon, decorated with beautiful stonework designs. Flandre's eyes could pick out figures moving in the windows, the burning lamps within lighting them up like a beacon. She turned her head high towards the heavens, watching the stars silently for a moment. So beautiful. Flandre always stared at the stars longingly. They were free up above in the sky. Tonight, if everything went well, she would be free as well. Her gaze fell to the

large iron gate and the high, brown brick wall which surrounded Remilia's grand home. It was covered with moss, a tapestry of greenery. Sister always said that it added character.

Hong Meiling, the skillful gatekeeper of the scarlet devil mansion would be guarding the gate plus the grounds surrounding the wall. *The one thing standing in the way of ultimate victory.* Flandre carefully flew across the vast building's roof while avoiding any windows and open spaces. She froze under a large potted plant, tucking her wings in behind her as a maid walked along one of the battlements, sweeping the dust away as she went and humming a tune to herself. When the coast was clear, Flandre jumped across the roof like a ballerina, her graceful movements wasting no needless effort. She reached the edge of the estate and leapt off the mansion, gliding down on the air currents and landing without a sound. She found herself in the stately gardens.

*Ah, the gardens.* Even on a sunny day, sister enjoys reading in the shade while the bees buzz around the beautiful flowers in bloom while the wind rustles Remilia's well groomed hair. With Sakuya as always waiting nearby with a kettle full of warm refreshing tea. *I was even allowed to join her on occasions as long as I promised to be on my best behaviour but nothing compares to the freedom of the night, the all encompassing shroud which covers everything in its dark embrace.* Flandre darted in amongst the tall dragon flowers, zig-zagging past the statuettes of fair maidens, and zoomed past the dense hedge rows, all the while keeping a keen eye and ear out for any wandering fairies. The strong scented pollen almost made her sneeze but she held it in with some effort.

The grand wall grew into view in all its glory until she was right next to the colossal barrier. Flandre slowed and landed on the well trimmed lawn with a light tap. She smiled as she reflected on her masterful strategy. Meiling would be standing (or more likely, sitting) guard by the main gate. Any living thing would be detected by her if it strayed unwisely into the mansions perimeter, irregardless of whether or not she was awake which was particularly useful in

Meiling's case. Patchouli had come up with that system but had been very cagey about telling Flandre anything about it when she had casually dropped a question regarding it during a convasation. Well, whatever. It's never had to deal with someone of my calibre before. I, the cute little scarlet sister Flandre, would send out three clones, each leaving the mansion in sequence and in different directions, with me, the real deal, leaving last. There was no way that Meiling would be able to cover the entire estate at once. Even with her impressive speed, circling the mansions wall in the necessary time required to catch me would be impossible. That's the plan anyway.

With that, Flandre closed her eyes and concentrated, moaning at the strange sensation that temporarily splitting yourself up involved. Three new vampires pulled themselves out and jumped out onto the green grass, the moonlight illumining all four of them in pale white light. They smiled and nodded at each other, and without a word being exchanged, launched themselves off into the twilight. She waited impatiently for them to reach their destinations, tapping her foot on the soft earth.

"Now... ," she breathed.

Flandre paused for dramatic effect, savoring the moment.

*Time to check up on our good hard-working gatekeeper.* She flew up to the top of the wall, and perched carefully on top of it. She wasn't that far from the gate and with her superior vision she could see Hong Meiling perfectly, even in the darkness. The mansions loyal gatekeeper was sitting down with her back resting against the wall, her head bobbing to and fro, her eternal battle with sleep well underway. Well, Flandre mused, it must be tough having to work twenty hours a day.

She could feel the psychic connection from her clones, the message was clear: In position boss!

Flandre limbered up her legs and shoulders, relaxing and loosening her limbs. *We'll see who is faster!* She silently sent the order.

"GO!"

The clones leapt over the wall, covering a great distance before landing in the grassland surrounding the Scarlet Devil Mansion. From her vantage point, Flandre watched in excitement as Hong Meiling's head snapped to attention, suddenly wide awake. She stood up, her gaze searching, picking up the disturbance in the air. Then suddenly, she took off, a sonic boom announcing her departure. Wind was sucked in and pushed out in a circle as the gatekeeper ascended into the air. And then she was gone, vanishing from sight. This was the tricky part, as Flandre would have to dispel the clones before Meiling got close enough to identify them. If Meiling got a good look at one of them, then she could only assume that they belonged to her employers little sister.

*Well, it would be tricky task for a normal, run of the mill Youkai, but not for someone with boundless intelligence like me.* Flandre tracked the gatekeepers progress which was more difficult than she had anticipated. *She's fast. Real fast.* Flandre frowned with the mental effort. Just a little longer and she would make her break for freedom. Her hands tightened on the grey stone wall, digging into it like it was made of paper. She took in several deep breaths, her chest heaving up and down as her lungs filled her muscles with energy. Up here, perched up on the wall, just moments before she made her break for freedom, she took a precious few moments to savour the magnificent view. Swaying grasslands stretched outwards until they made way for a deep looking forest which sat just on the horizon. The musky sent of seawater marked the presence of the misty lake. Flandre heard some bats flapping from their roosts from one of the mansions towers behind her. They flew over her, the promise of a rich nights hunt waiting for them. *Just wait for me little bats. I'll be joining you shortly.*

*Now!* She dispelled the first clone that had been sprinting away from the east side of the mansion. Meiling had been rapidly approaching it

and Flandre had just managed to enact the incantation before the gatekeeper came into viewing distance. She wouldn't cut things so closely next time. Without stopping for even a second, Meiling changed her course immediately, gunning for the next nearest clone on the south side of the mansion. The vampire giggled. *What must you be thinking Meiling? I bet you have no clue as to what just happened. With the gatekeeper chasing ghosts in the south, its time to spread my wings.* Flandre took her chance and catapulted herself off the wall, one hand firmly placed on her hat to keep the wind from ripping it away from her. The ground shook as she landed, her feet pushing deep indentations into the earth. Splinters formed in the ground, but Flandre was already sprinting away from her home at an incredible pace. The blinding speed of a true blood vampire.

The trees and bushes flashed past her as she ran, turning into blurs of colour as she pushed her limbs to their limits. Beads of sweat ran down her face as she worked her limbs to their limits. She pushed through the thick grassland at an incredible pace, creating a line of rustling greenery in her wake like the passing of a comet. *It sucks that I can't just fly away like the bats but I'm not stupid enough to try. Meiling would spot me in a heartbeat. Maybe even sister.* Remilia often liked to sit peacefully by the window and watch the passing of day into night.

"Damn it," she muttered. Still, the moment was not lost on Flandre. She had left the mansion alone for the first time since coming to this magical land. She was her own boss, free to do as she wanted. No chaperon treating her like a little child! No annoying fairy maids! No Sakuya watching her every move! She felt elated, ecstatic. She smiled, a wonderful smile filled with happiness. The wind parted before her, she was like some mythical sword that could not be stopped, cutting elegantly into the air flow. Lost in her thoughts, she almost slipped up the timing with the next clone but that would never happen to Flandre Scarlet.

But Meiling wasn't going after the northern clone at all anymore, she was doubling back here! Flandre gasped, looking around frantically

for somewhere to hide. She was very close to the misty lake but then everything in her bag would get wet and soggy, not to mention the rippling effect and splashing sound might give her away. She could take her chances by ducking in the tall grass. Flandre shook her head. There had to be a better option. She had almost made it to the forest too! Scattered trees surrounded her like silent sentinels.

With only a scant few moments to spare, Flandre flew up into the nearest tree and did her best to suppress her spirit. Meiling appeared soon after, landing with the force of a hurricane, the grass sea rippling violently away from the gatekeepers point of impact. Her long green dress fluttered behind her as she stood up to her full height which towered over most Youkai in the Scarlet Devil Mansion. *Go away, stupid gatekeeper. Idiot!* Everyone is always trying to ruin my fun. Flandre shut her eyes tightly, not even wanting the faint glint of her red eyes to leak out. Her breathing slowed to a dangerously low level like she was entering some kind of hibernation. She pressed her spirit into a tiny little ball and locked it away as deeply as she could. Don't see me, she chanted repeatedly in her mind. Flandre did everything she could to hide her small presence in the grassy field of old trees. Catching sight of her was extremely unlikely but seeing with the naked eye wasn't the only way to 'see'. With enough practice you could feel someones spirit and Meiling was especially good at that given her job.

*I just need to concentrate. Don't panic! Whatever you do, don't panic! Slow my breathing and my heartbeat. Don't make any movements. Close my eyes so that Meiling doesn't feel that she is being watched. I am part of the forest, just a branch, one of many hanging from the side of this greatwood.* Below her, she heard footsteps as the stalking gatekeeper pushed herself through the tallgrass at a deliberate pace. A twig snapped underfoot. Meiling stopped for a fleeting moment. Just a moment. Flandre could feel herself quivering slightly at the closeness of Meiling and at the novelty of the idea that someone was actually hunting her, of all people. This was an unfamiliar sensation, it was exciting, intoxicating and at the same time utterly terrifying.

She could almost smile but stopped her body and mind from showing any outward emotion. That simple act might just give her away. She just allowed herself the smallest of smirks before shutting her mind away in a shell. She gave it five minutes by her count before she dared to squint her eyes open and take a tentative look around.

Not a living soul could be felt nor seen, the only sound that could be heard was the rustling of the chilly wind as it pushed through the leaves and onto Flandre's bare arms. The two remaining clones should have run out of energy by now since she didn't give them all that much to begin with. Taking a last look around her, she descended from her temporary refuge while brushing away the leaves that clung to her dress, tutting in disapproval. She heard something and froze, her stomach turning to jelly. Had she come down too soon? She listened. That sound. The rapid beating of wings through the air?

It was just some of her friends from earlier. A couple of bats out in the night, looking for prey as they darted between the trees. This sight brightened her mood, it seemed a good omen. She was the same in a way, stalking the night for something new that would sustain her.

Flandre took in a big lungful of fresh cool air as she gazed out at the misty lake which bordered the eastern part of the mansion, acting like a vast natural moat. Confident that no one would see her, the little sister of the Scarlet Devil Mansion spread her wings and sped off into the night.



## Misty Lake

Flying below the clouds in the nights sky, Flandre Scarlet could barely contain her euphoria. She was as free as a bird, free to fly and do whatever she wanted. Her broad smile stretched from one rosy cheek to the other. She flexed her hands, feeling so full of power.

She glanced down below at the misty lake which extended all around her, the refrection of the full moon painted upon its smooth surface like a canvas.

"Whooo-hoooooooo!" she called out as she performed a perfect cartwheel in midair, twirling around and around until she started to feel sick.

"Urgggg," she grumbled.

*Well, maybe that wasn't such a good idea. Lets try some extreme driving instead.*

Flandre suddenly strayed off her level heading and started to zoom down towards the lake. With her bright, colourful wings, Flandre looked like a glowing meteor crashing down towards the planets surface. The wind was battering against her, violently resisting her decent, the pressure alone was enough to strip the skin from lesser beings, but she would not be denied. The vampire let out another shout of excitement as she hurtled downwards but most of the sound was lost in her roaring decent. Subconsciously, she extended her spirit around herself, just enough to keep herself nice and dry.

She hit the water with the force of an avalanche, sending water cascading in all directions. A massive tidal wave of liquid was pushed out around the entry point, rising as high as her home mansion's surrounding walls. Flandre was holding her arms out in front of her like a professional diver, shooting though the water as smoothly as a

shark on the hunt. Strange fishes and eels could be seen in the murky lake which quickly darted away from this strange invasion into their realm. An immense kappa fish the size of a truck pushed itself through the currents with big, purposeful waves. Its fins straining either side of it with every push. Its giant clear black eyes looked at Flandre's rainbow wings with interest.

"Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" yelled Flandre as the immense mass of water parted before her little spiritual bubble. She passed through the dark lake with the speed of a torpedo before arching herself upwards. On the surface, the water started to glow as she approached closer and closer. Flandre burst out of the misty sea, a mighty splash announcing her escape. Droplets of water were still raining down from her explosive entrance but she paid them no heed. Even as she flew up and the rain began to slide down her face, she didn't mind. She was too caught up in the moment.

"Wow, so refreshing," she said with no small amount of relish. *Sister would never have let me do something like that, not in a million years.* That crushing feeling of having so much water held at bay by a simple energy field, to know that a moments lapse in concentration would let the whole colossal volume of liquid come crashing in on you. That kind of thing was exciting to her. The possibility of danger. She darted down again and traced the mirror-like surface of the lake with her finger, causing gentle ripples to fan out in her wake. Her moonlight lit reflection stared back at her. It was a strange sight, almost like one of her clones was mockingly imitating its masters moments.

A shadow began to form on the surface of the lake. Something was coming up from the depths and whatever it was, it was big! It grew larger and larger. Air bubbles started to ripple the surface. Flandre looked on in fascination as the giant kappa from before thrust its head out of the lake, its gigantic jaws opening wide, ready to engulf the much smaller Youkai like it was swatting a fly out of the sky. Flandre effortlessly dodged being eaten alive, leaping out of the jaws of death at the last second. She choked as the fishes rancid breath

blew out of its open maw as it dropped back into the sea with a crashing wave. *Ewwwww, disgusting fish.*

She continued on her way, gliding across the air currents without any real effort on her part. Flandre was much too busy looking through the contents of her little bag. She took out a clear glass bottle filled with crimson blood and raised it to her red lips. She took a small swig and quickly and carefully placed it back inside, before she was tempted any further. *Ah, it feels so good as it travels down to your stomach, as if its warming you up from the inside as it goes along.*

Flandre licked her lips and her long, pointy fangs. Her twin red eyes glowed a little more brightly than before. The thirst was upon her, she wanted more. Her mouth hung open, her breathing becoming more labored. She shook her head to shake away the feelings that were swirling around in her mind. *I must have more self control than that. That blood is meant to last the whole night.* She rubbed her face and groaned in irritation. Her hand was still in the bag. Flandre rummaged around again and felt something else, something long and soft that was bound in string.

She pulled it out. It was the map she had burrowed from elder sister's display case. She tried to examine it but the wind had other plans and almost tore it from her grasp. *Stupid wind.* She slowed down her flying speed and covered the scroll with one pale skinned arm. Unravelling the map, Flandre read the heading out loud.

"Map of London."

She traced with her finger down the map to the largest body of water and read the title back to herself. "River Thames."

Such a large river, that must be the human term for this misty lake. She smirked. *Such a silly name.* Flandre had taken the map which had been the only one of its kind that she had ever seen inside the mansions spacious and endless rooms. She hadn't been able to procure anything better from the library on her many little raids and had had to settle for this 'travel sized map'. She scratched her

head, thinking. Obviously this place was no longer filled with the many houses, castles and roads depicted on the map anymore but there was no telling how old and out of date this map actually was and she hadn't been allowed out in such a long time. *What I need is to see a landmark. Yes, that's what I need!*

"Hey you!" came a perky voice from behind her.

Flandre flinched and looked back, worried that Meiling had trailed her somehow. A blue glow could be seen in the dead of night. It was rapidly gaining speed on her, approaching from behind.

"Hey, wait up," it called. It had quite a high pitched voice. *A common fairy? Ha.*

"Catch me if you can, Fairy!" Flandre yelled, before zooming off into the distance, outpacing her pursuer in an instant.

She flew over what seemed like an endless expanse of dirty, cloudy looking water, only broken up by the occasional patch of dark green moss. *Man, this place sure is dull. Things better liven up on the other side of this lake.* The moss started to thicken all of a sudden which was accompanied with a scattering of lanky looking swamp trees which looked barely strong enough to support their flimsy weight.

The thick mist clouds floating around the lake's surface started to dissipate. Flandre's face brightened up as she spotted the first patches of land since leaving the mansion. The lake's reaches finally giving way to solid ground. She quickly descended on a cushion of air, eager to make up for lost time with a healthy dose of exploring. A double tap tap marked her landing as her shoes touched down upon the soft earth.

The coastline was just behind her. The sound of the currents as they brushed up against the land provided a calming backdrop to this otherwise swampy looking area. In front of Flandre stood a fair number of thin trees and smaller green plant-life. A small creature looked up from behind a decaying log, its eyes glowing brightly in the

dark, scrutinizing the vampire before it thought better of whatever it was thinking and scurried away. The stagnant air washing in from the seaside was staring to make her gag.

Flandre kicked a nearby stone and started to glide along, hovering just above the dirty looking ground. She wasn't willing to dirty her shoes any further on this muddy bank. The innocent looking stone she had kicked earlier punched cleanly through the nearest tree like a bullet, shaking it to its very core. A family of bats was disturbed from its roost along with similar critters to the one that had been seen crawling across the log earlier. They followed suit and jumped to one of the neighbouring trees. *Sorry little bats. Sometime I don't know my own strength.*

"..was that?" Flandre heard faintly. Her keen senses pinpointed the source of the voice. Her head quickly snapping around like a predator. She flew up into the nearest tree as she detected the creek of a door opening.

"What's all this racket?" said a fairy with short curved blonde hair. She was in her nightdress and had clearly been woken up. She had emerged from a door, a door that was actually part of the tree. Now that she looked more closely it had actually been carved into the tree itself. A lighted window stood out like a beacon above the doorway. A burning candle in a glass container was the source of the light, pushing away the shadows and illuminating the hollow tree from within.

*How could anybody live in such a dirty and unsightly place. A hollow tree? An old hollow tree in a muddy area next to that murky misty lake?*

*Well I guess that's fairies for you. Not everyone can be as refined as a noble and long lived vampire like myself.* Still, it had pinged her interest, about the only thing that had since leaving her home. What was it like inside, she wondered? How did fairies on the outside live?

The fairy, who Flandre decided to nickname 'lampshade' due to her hairstyle walked hesitantly across the grassy ground, her feet crinkling the blades of grass as she ventured outside her treehouse home. The slight sounds that would have been lost on a normal human's ears were as loud as a marching band to Flandre. Her hunter's senses worked to amplify even the smallest sounds. Flandre could also feel the fairy's body heat, the hot breath being carried on the cold night breeze. And if she really concentrated, the pitter patter of the fairy's heart. Beat. Beat. Beat.

Flandre crouched among the shadows of the branches, binding her time. Her wings only contained a glimmer of their usual colour, so that they didn't give her presence away. Lampshade pulled out a rusty gold oil lantern and was about to use some common magic to light it. While her gaze was elsewhere, Flandre, who had pressed her legs down like a coiled spring, shot out of her perch at supersonic speed. In the time it takes someone to blink, she had covered half the space between herself and the fairy who continued to fiddle with her lamp. As she passed the blissfully unaware fairy, Flandre lightly tapped her back before landing behind her silently and jumping into the treehouse. Now inside, she pressed her back up against the hallway's wall, thereby removing any sign of her in the open doorway.

A startled yelp rebounded around the dark forest. The towering trees offering the fairy no answers.

"W-what... w-who?," lampshade stammered.

Flandre Scarlet giggled like a little schoolgirl. She was on the verge of laughing out loud but somehow managed to place a hand firmly over her mouth to stop the outburst. When her laughing fit had subsided she cast a gaze around her new surroundings. It was a simple place, that was in great need of a good cleaning. The entrance had led into a small hallway, decorated with simple superstitious charms pinned to the walls. Little shoes lay on the ground while patchwork coats were hung up on iron nails. A tree stump stood alone at the end of the hall, a makeshift table with a torn

book resting on top. The middle of the hardwood tree had been left to act as a giant supporting pillar, so that the home didn't just collapse in on itself. The place stank of bark and nature which wasn't helped by the choice in flooring. Or rather the lack of flooring. It was just grass.

*What a quaint little abode. Sakuya would have had a fit if she saw the state this place was in.* With not much to interest her, Flandre looked around, a bored expression on her face. There was a compact desk set against one of the walls with the same kind of rusty oil lamp that the fairy held. Speaking of which, she could still hear lampshade aimlessly wandering around outside, searching for ghosts or whatever. Her eyes fell down onto the desk's top draw. Her curious mind urged her to look inside. She reached down and gently pulled the handle. It was locked. She frowned. Without thinking, Flandre pulled harder, ripping out the draw from its fixings in a shower of splinters. The oil lamp tumbled off the side and hit the floor, busting into flames. The grass floor caught alight immediately.

"Ut-oh," Flandre said sheepishly.

She backed away from the fire as she felt the heat building on her skin. It glowed brightly, the flames hungrily licking at one of the nearby hanging coats which also started to burn.

Flandre flinched as she heard a startled shout from outside. Lampshade was rushing back to her burning home. It wasn't me, Flandre thought. It was an accident.

Feeling distraught, Flandre flew up into the hole in the ceiling which lead to the first and only other floor in the house. It was the fairy's bedroom, the room that she had seen from outside. A large comfy looking bed with flowery covers dominated the center. The black smoke was starting to rise up from the hole into the bedroom. Flandre was convinced that it was a sign that the fire was coming after her in revenge. She flung her petite body into the bed and pulled the covers back over her like a child escaping the outside world. Downstairs, Lampshade's panicked voice was trying to recite

a beginners level water spell. Flandre recognized the words from one of Patchouli's tedious lectures.

"M-may the water spirits c-come hither and bind themselves to my will."

Flandre heard the whoosh of water rushing out from nowhere and the sizzle as it impacted against the wildfire however after a few seconds the relentless crackling of flame returned as if nothing had ever happened. Lampshade started the incantation again but was fumbling up the words in her hysteria. *I can use better water magic then that.* Realization dawned on her face. So why didn't she?

She flung the covers off and moved to the opening, coughing at the noxious smoke that had thickened in these scant moments. *Now, how did it go again?*

She held out her hands, her long sharp fingernails stabbing into the dense black cloud. She shut her eyes and recited the words in her mind since she was too skilled a magic user to have to go to the inconvenience of speaking them out loud. A bubble of crystal clear liquid started to form in the air between her hands as the first words flashed through her mind. It grew bigger and denser, taking on a deep sea blue shade. Currents were swarming around inside the sphere, like it was a miniature planet. It cast the bedroom in a ghostly blue radiance.

Flandre opened her eyes and gasped in surprise at the gleaming blue circle that she had created. It looked even more perfect than in her training lectures with its luminous glow and shimmering exterior. Bubbles rippled up to its surface, popping as they hit open air. *Of course, when it came to the crunch, the younger Scarlet sister's innate talent would rise to any occasion. Now, I just need to release this large volume of water in the direction of the...*

Her thought process was interrupted when a screaming fairy came racing through the entry hole in a big puff of dark smoke. She was coughing furiously with one hand held over her mouth, her little



dressing gown was singed around the edges. Her eyes were squinted tightly closed but she could just make out the figure of someone else standing in her room with a glowing blue beach ball floating in the gloom.

Flandre drew in her breath sharply, backing away a step, her eyes wide before she realized that it was just the fairy. *That wasn't good either though. I'm busted.*

"Who are-," began lampshade before the waterball that Flandre had been keeping in check with her mind started to wobble and quake.

*Oh crap, the sphere!*

Without her guidance and focus, it exploded with the force of a tsunami, flooding the room in seconds with a torrent of water.

Both Youkai and fairy managed a panicked yelp before the crashing waves overtook them, carrying them along for the ride. With Flandre's immense power and not so immense control, the spell had been far too strong for the task that she had had in mind. The poor little tree house was filled to the brim with a raging river of rushing blue water.

Flandre was pushed back against the bedroom window, the swirling cascade pinning her tightly against the glass. With her cheek squashed comically against the window and her arms struggling to hold on against the water, her older sister would have laughed at her predicament if she could see her now. The endless rushing stream would not let her move at all. Flandre was rapidly losing her patience. She pressed her hands against the window and uttered some words, causing some air bubbles to escape from her mouth into the blue water ocean that the fairy's home had become.

The glass instantly shattered into countless shards. With nowhere else to go, Flandre was flung out back into the cold night. Everywhere water was gushing out of the fairies home from every opening and even creating a few new ones, such was the intense

force of the waterfall. In fact, that's what the tree-house now resembled, a waterfall.

"Kuuuh," Flandre grunted as she righted herself in midair. She was soaking wet from head to toe. The contents of her bag was most likely ruined and some of the glass had cut her arm. Blood dripped out of the wound down her skin, the smell of which caused Flandre's stomach to churn. Blood was nice but not when it was your own.

Water was still gushing out from the windows, the sides and the front door. Broken furniture was flung randomly out across the land, various smaller belongings joining them. A battered clock was ringing out of tune. The little fairy's entire life had just been violently flushed out onto the grass. Just then, Lampshade bust from the front door which by now had been ripped from its fixings. She was deposited out alongside her effects like just another piece of homewear, drifting along with the tide.

She stood up and looked at her ruined home with teary eyes. She started to sob, tears running down her face, competing with the droplets of liquid that fell from her soggy blonde hair. *I think its time to leave*, Flandre thought. And with that, she left Lampshade alone to pick up the pieces.

She didn't fly far before picking a tree at random and settling down to attend to her arm. Opening her bag, she frowned when the first thing she pulled out was her ruined map of London. She flung it away. *So much for returning that*. That would be a worry for later though and she had other things to attend to at the moment. Her bottle of precious blood was still thankfully intact. Gathering some drenched tissue, she wiped at her arm. The cool effect that the dampness had was at least smoothing. Flandre sneezed.

*Stupid fairy. I was only trying to help and she has to go and surprise me like that, ruining a perfectly executed spell. And now I'm stuck in a tree, cold, wet and with many of my things soaked right through.* She snapped off a twig and lit the tip with a quick spell. It burned brightly in the dark and was pleasantly warm. *Well, I'm not going*

*back to the mansion just because of one regrettable mishap. I'm stronger than that. I'm Flandre Scarlet after all.*

She spend the next few minutes warming herself up by the glow of the fire. Strange night owls were announcing the start of their nightly hunt with a 'twit twoo'. The frosty breeze blowing in from the misty lake was buffeted by the forest, a fact that Flandre was grateful for. The moon still hung in the sky, full of brilliance and wonder. Flandre stared at it longingly while she dried up, marveling at the beauty of it. The perfect white shape, the glowing light that could be seen from anywhere. It was her first sight of the moon outside the mansion's confining grounds and that made it special to her.

*Ah, the mansion. Flandre was very fond of her home, she just wished that Remilia would place more trust in her and let her out sometimes. I wonder what sister is doing right now? Is she worried about me feeling ill? Is Sakuya checking up on me? Is my clone performing its role?*

Flandre rubbed her head. No. *Get those thoughts out of my head. I should be having fun and exploring the outside world. I can save thinking about home for later.*

She reached inside her bag with one hand, digging around for her blood bottle. *One little sip wouldn't kill anybody. Well, it might if I didn't have one.* She giggled before pulling out her prize triumphantly, like it was the holy grail. A dark skinned lizard crawled down behind Flandre, scurrying down the main trunk. Several glow flies buzzed around overhead, looking for food. They shone a bright yellow, in stark contrast to the backdrop of the nights sky. The forest was denser here, further away from the misty lake. She was surrounded by a maze of trees, the closely packed long trunks looking somewhat like fat wooden prison bars. They reminded Flandre of her basement prison.

She raised the bottle to her lips, savouring the intoxicating scent on the cool air. Her fangs extended in excitement. Just as she was about to drink the rich nectar, she noticed that one of the glow flies

was rapidly growing on the horizon. This one, rather than the melancholy yellow, shone a richy sparkling deep blue. It was heading straight towards her, a trail of glittering icicles following in its wake. As it came into view, zipping past the tall trees at high speed, Flandre rolled her eyes when she realized what it was. A blue coloured fairy. *Terrific, yet another fairy.* Always with the fairies. Be it in the mansion, or now, outside, it seemed like she was some kind of fairy magnet.

The fairy stopped in front of Flandre's resting spot with a ultramarine bang, the aura surrounding her during her flight suddenly dissipating. A slight wind rustled the leaves. The newcomer seemed to be grinning in victory. A big broad smile from ear to ear.

"Hahaha, I finally found you!" she declared.

Flandre looked up from her wooden branch picnic, still nursing her bottle of fresh blood.

"You were looking for me? Who are you exactly?"

The fairy chuckled, crossing her arms across her chest and shaking her head.

"Not from around these parts, are you? My name is Cirno and I'm the strongest fairy in the whole of Gensokyo. You will regret making a fool out of me!"

"What? I haven't even met you before, fairy."

Cirno pointed an accusing finger at Flandre. "Don't play dumb with me. I was flying above the misty lake when I spotted you and flew over to introduce myself. Just as I was about to reach you you created a massive wave which swept me away. Then you ran off when I tried to confront you!"

Flandre was swirling the crimson blood around in its bottle, wondering when she would be able to quench her thirst in peace.

Cirno must have been that mysterious blue blur from earlier, she thought. Flandre Scarlet smirked.

"So you came here to get your own back? Well I'm not in the mood to play with you right now. If you come and find me later maybe we can play then, but I've had enough of fairies for one night."

She waved her hand dismissively.

"Now shoe. Off with you."

Cirno's face contorted into a mask of annoyance. Her small fists were clenched tightly by her sides.

"Don't try to chicken out of this. I challenge you to a match of Danmaku, no holes barred!"

Flandre sighed yet again, rubbing her brow. *Did this fairy even know what she was dealing with here? Probably not. Not many people know about me after all. I'd better not reveal my second name just in case the word gets out. Sister might learn of this otherwise.*

"Are all the fairies in the London area this stupid? You are out of your depth little fairy, but I'll forgive you. After all, you have no idea know who I am. Leave now, and I'll let you go peacefully."

*After that dressing down, this 'Cirno' should finally see some sense.* Flandre turned her attention back to her lonely bottle and the mouthwatering blood within. Being denied this much only made her heart grow fonder. Still, looking forward to something for so long only made it all the more sweeter. Several icicle shards impacted on the branch Flandre was perched on. Rat-a-tat they went, sounding like a machine gun.

Cirno was laughing arrogantly while wagging her finger like Sakuya always did when Flandre misbehaved.

"I don't care who you are. I'm Cirno, the most powerful and intelligent fairy ever born and I challenge you! Also, calling me an idiot when you don't even know the correct name for this area? You're the real idiot!"

She laughed again, pointing at Flandre with one outstretched finger. Flandre didn't like being laughed at. Not at all. Particularly by a mere fairy.

Her talons extended from her hands, digging into the bark. Her teeth clenched together. A growing noise escaped her lips. Her red eyes, now glowing with a fierce intensity locked onto Cirno.

"You want a danmaku duel? You got it!" she spat. With an angry snarl she tucked away her bottle and prepared to fight, suddenly in the mood for it once again.

## Fairy Wars

Flandre Scarlet stood upright and bared her fangs threateningly at Cirno who was hovering slightly above her, backlit by the luminous moonlight. A chill wind blew throughout the tree's canopy that she now resided within but Flandre didn't even register it as it brushed coldly against her skin. The fire in her heart had been lit and Cirno had fanned the flames still further with her slanderous words. *The audacity of this fairy is unbelievable. Me, the younger Scarlet sister being insulted by a mere fairy! Not only did she call me stupid but she has the gall to challenge me to a danmaku duel?*

She was either very brave or very stupid, possibly both. Flandre pointed up at the ice fairy, the red tint in her eyes glowing more fiercely with each passing moment.

"I have many fairies who cater to my every need and not one of them would ever do anything to make me angry because they know their place in this world. I will show you how powerless you are right now, Cirno!"

Even though Cirno could feel the charged power bleeding off this Youkai into the surrounding area she still appeared unconcerned. That supremely confident grin she wore had never left her mouth. Chuckling, she replied, "You might be surprised at just how strong a fairy can be but unfortunately for you I'm not just any common fairy. No, I'm pretty famous around these parts."

The icy fairy proudly placed one of her small hands up against her chest. "I'm the smart and charming fairy Cirno! Sometimes I even surprise myself with my own strength." She paused for dramatic effect before pointing right back at Flandre and adding. "So I'd better not finish this duel too quickly by accident."

Flandre was emitting a low growl while barely containing her composure. As the younger sister of Remilia Scarlet, Flandre wasn't

used to this kind of attitude. Accident she says! "The only accident that could happen is that I somehow forget that this is a danmaku contest and fry you into nothingness," she yelled. "But don't worry as this won't last long!" She shot up, bursting from the treetop in a shower of leaves and broken twigs.

"Now," she began but her words escaped her when instead of the arrogant blue pest hovering defiantly above her she instead found herself staring down a massive gleaming ball of ice that dwarfed the vampire. And it was hurtling straight towards her. With only seconds to think, Flandre simply decided on the most direct form of action and smashed the ball in its center with her fist, effortlessly shattering it in two. The separate monolithic pieces fell either side of her and crashed into the forest in an impressive explosion of shattering ice.

The resulting icy cloud made it difficult to see but a vampire's eyes were not the only tool available to them. Nice try, fairy, but I can feel you. I can smell the faint trace of heat on your breath. She summoned a shining crimson spear in one hand and darted forwards, avoiding the ice shards that Cirno reactively shot at her from the shelter of a large redwood. Then blindly, Flandre threw the energy spear downwards towards Cirno's hiding place. It cut threw the air with a high pitched whine and impacted on the tree with the force of a blazing volcano. The proud redwood tree that had stood tall in this forest for hundreds of years was instantly pulverized under the intense blood red heat of Flandre's crimson spear. Great chunks of earth were thrown into the nights sky. The ground shook with the strength of a giants lumbering footstep.

From the safety of the sky Flandre watched the scene of destruction unfolding before her with mischievous delight. Burning leaves littered the forest floor with each little fire pin prickling the ground with minute sources of light. Blowing things up was so satisfying, so exhilarating. It always served to relax her and helped to remove any tension that she was feeling.

A mocking laugh sounded from behind her. Flandre spun in midair, her blonde ponytail bobbing around as she did so. Cirno was floating



triumphantly unscathed before the vampire and was looking very pleased with herself.

"It will take more than that to beat me!" she declared to the world while pointing a thumb at herself just in case anyone missed it. Her smooth icy wings fluttered behind her.

*So a simple attack like that won't bring her down huh? That's fine.* Flandre grinned. Not the kind hearted sort of grin. The cruel, wicked grin that might cross a child's face when they knew that what they were doing was wrong but did it anyway. She pressed her palms together and crisscrossed her fingers.

"Lets see you stop this one, fairy!"

Thousands and thousands of shimmering orbs started to form around her. They filled the night sky, mimicking the star clusters and suns that one could usually see through a telescope but you certainly didn't need a device to see what Flandre had prepared. It was like a miniature universe with colossal orbs resembling planets mixed in with smaller orbs that might have been orbiting moons or floating asteroids. There were deep red ones, pale blue ones, bright green ones. All the colours that the little vampires wings displayed and all of them brimming with forbidden power.

"Scarlet Kaleidoscope!" Flandre called, announcing her spell card with supreme confidence. As if daring anyone to stand against it.

Cirno watched pale faced as the countless orbs suddenly started to hurtle towards her all at once. They hovered up and down and buzzed side to side, making their path unpredictable. Each one dwarfed the fairy in size. It was like witnessing a meteor shower but with you at the focal point. In response Cirno let loose a storm of ice that engulfed the front row of glowing circles in a blizzard of frosty crystals but this only bought her the merest of breathing room as the powerful energy encased inside the ice refused to be contained. One by one the ice prisons exploded into a cloud of cold glacial dust.

"Awww c-crap," Cirno stuttered, forming a ice shield protectively around her just as the first of the orbs slammed destructively into her.

The pulsating orb crashed into her, effortlessly shattering her little ice wall and flinging her back at high speeds in the process but it had done its job. She was still in the game after all. Her clear ice wings strained their hardest to slow her momentum and control her flight path so that she could narrowly avoid the second orb which sailed harmlessly just over her head. Cirno had to duck a little to dodge that one. It made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up while simultaneously messing up her short blue hair with static electricity.

Cirno ducked and weaved past the onslaught of bullets, making her way as best as she could without getting hit. Flandre was laughing at the light show, becoming lost in the moment as she always did when the battlelust overtook her. The glare from the pyrotechnic display reflected off her red eyes, painting her with an eerie glow. *That's right Cirno, come closer, come closer to your doom.* She started to mix in other attacks. The crimson spears from before, but this time many of them shot out at once. Spinning golden blades of dense matter appeared out of thin air and added their weight of fire to the explosive display.

She grunted in pain as the impact flung her out of the sky and down into the forest below. Flandre watched her fall with amusement, likening her to an icicle that had just been blasted off hanging branch which was a game she sometimes played in the winter. This at least put Cirno out of the firing line for the time being and Flandre's spell card finally ebbed out the last of its power before fading out of the material world.

Still, Flandre was impressed. She knew that the orb hadn't hurt the fairy as much as she expected it would. *Tough little pest. Looks like she wasn't all talk after all.* The game was still on. She dropped down from the sky into the forest canopy below, slipping through a gap between the many branches and leaves. She tasted the air,

noting that it seemed thinner and colder in places. A good sign if you wanted to find an ice fairy.

Flandre scooted from trunk to trunk like a squirrel while peering attentively out into the quiet forest as she did so. She didn't spy any annoying fairies or much of anything for that matter. The many nocturnal animals who liked to hunt during the nighttime hours were noticeably absent, driven away by the intense danmaku display no doubt. The atmosphere was silent and foreboding. Flandre leapt to another tree lookout, cheerfully gazing into the murky scenery for any signs of movement.

"Come on out, Cirno," she taunted. "Come on out so we can play."

Flandre felt like a real hunter on the trail of her prey. Not the pretend kind when she stalked the fairy maids of the mansion. This was real. She was hunting another living being in a game that wasn't quite a matter of life or death but as close to it as you could get without dire consequences. A rapid heat source rustled a bush below, clumsily knocking each grass shard as it went. Even delicate sounds like these were like church bells ringing to Flandre in such an quiet environment.

"Is that you, Cirno?"

Flandre broke from the tree's bushy canopy and soared downwards from her perch to get a closer look. The grass was waving wildly as something small passed through it. Flandre frowned as she realized that it was far too small for a fairy. The hairy form of a common boar emerged from the bush, grunting as it bobbed up and down among the undergrowth. She snarled in disappointment, almost killing the boar out of spite. The air was definitely colder around here, of that she had no doubt. I'm dealing with an ice fairy here so I should be looking for cold spots, not heat sources. Flandre closed her eyes, shutting out all outside interference, feeling the glacial winds picking up from her left, brushing coldly against her bare arms.

She spun around and spotted Cirno flying dangerously close to the forest floor. The blue sparkle was speeding directly towards her on a trail of icicles. There you are, fairy! Flandre accelerated towards her adversary, spreading her arms out like a fighter plane. Bushes were smacked down with strong bursts of air pressure and small plants were violently uprooted as the vampire zoomed past them. Flandre wore a wide grin on her face as she anticipated the coming carnage.

Chilly air accompanied Cirno like the coming of winter as the two forces closed on each other. "I wasn't hiding. I was just catching my breath," called the ice fairy. Snow droplets started to rain down from the heavens. Only a few at first but the gathering storm steadily increased in its intensity. Stalactites started to form on branches, weighing them down with frosty clear ice.

"Resting?," Flandre yelled. "You shouldn't have bothered, as it won't matter in a few moments."

"Oh really?" Cirno said, waiting with smug satisfaction to deliver the punchline. She stopped her flight abruptly in a burst of pale blue light and hovered in place.

"Look around you. You've walked right into my ice tempest. Now," she declared, swinging her arms out. "Cool yourself off!"

Immediately the air temperature dropped to below freezing. Flandre found it hard to breath in the sub zero air as it hurt her lungs with each gasping mouthful. The trees froze over instantly, their leaves dropping off, dying in the numbing cold. The snow turned into a raging blizzard, battering the vampire with powerful icy winds which stung her exposed skin. Small crystals started to shape and form themselves on Flandre's clothing.

Flandre's fingertips grew rigid. Ice started to swallow up her legs like some animal devouring her alive. Her hands froze up into cubes but she clenched her fists and smashed the polar ice into dust. Cirno looked taken aback.

"W-why won't you freeze," she stammered as she watched this unstoppable force overcoming her icy trap while wearing that menacing smile of hers. Flandre left a glittering white trail of melted ice behind her as she burned as brightly as a firecracker. Her fists lashed out left and right, smashing and shattering snowballs three times her size. Rather than run, Cirno gulped once and then stood her ground, refusing to back down. "Fine. I'll just have to give it everything I have! After all, I'm the strongest!"

The temperature dropped even lower, if such a thing was even possible. Cirno's dress fluttered madly with all the power she was emitting. Sweat tricked down her brow and quickly turned into tiny tear shaped ice droplets. Cirno was only moments away from the raging vampires fury. Flandre's colourful wings stood out menacingly in the night, acting almost like hazard lights, warning of her approach.

The blizzard intensified, turning the forest floor around Cirno into the deep Arctic. She directed all of this extreme coldness onto Flandre, battling to extinguish her enormous power. "Freeze!" the fairy yelled, well aware of the stakes.

Flandre felt her limbs become overtaken with ice. Its spread across her like moss growing on a pond's surface and started to move across her chest. Flandre strained against it but her movements became stiff and laboured and she was unable to exert her full strength. She howled in annoyance. *So close, I'm so close. I can almost reach out and touch that annoying Cirno.* And she did reach out. Her sharp nails were only inches away before the ice claimed her and she was finally frozen solid.

Cirno was panting heavily with the strained effort that it had taken. Her hands were placed shakily on her knees, face downwards. Her chest was heaving. She couldn't remember the last time when she had had to push herself this far but it was all over now. After a brief sweet moment of rest the fairy let out a deep breath and allowed herself to look at her prize. Flandre was encased in a vast block of gleaming blue ice with one hand outstretched threateningly out of

her chilly prison to grasp at nothing but air. Her red eyes were wide open and still held a faint red glow. There was a silent intensity to them that made Cirno shiver despite herself. She stared at the cruel looking claws. That could have easily been her fate had she not been the most tenacious and gifted fairy in the history of Gensokyo.

Cirno floated over and tapped the ice mass. "Hello, anyone home?" she asked, before giggling at her own bad joke.

"I wonder how long I should leave you in there to cool off for," she mused. "Maybe a while. You seem like a pretty angry little girl to me." At was then that she noticed a small crack starting to form in her otherwise perfectly formed ice sculpture. Cirno frowned, wrinkled her nose and leaned forward to examine it.

"That shouldn't happen."

Another crack formed, and another. And another. Cirno looked confused. Pretty soon there was a network of fractures leading off in all directions. Flandre's hand, the one that had been silently resting outside of her prison twitched suddenly. The temperature, which had been below freezing started to sky rocket. The ice mass started to melt along with the thick snow that now covered the forest floor. Instinctively, Cirno knew that staying put would be a very bad idea.

She raced away as fast as her wings would carry her, making sure to put as much distance between them as possible. Behind her, Flandre's hand twitched again, then balled into a shaking fist that squeezed the air tightly. Then all of her digits extended outwards and the area around her simply exploded. A roaring, chaotic detonation that ripped the woodland apart in a roasting red flair of epic proportions. Cirno was thrown away by a current of hot, scalding air, sending her spinning through the air heads over heels.

"Wahhhhhh!" she screamed.

The section of forest they had been fighting in had been totally annihilated by the blast. Flandre stood alone in the center of ground

zero unharmed while everything around her was either burning or a blackened, smoldering husk. The smell of rotting vegetation filled her nostrils. She cleared her nose.

"Ah-ah-ah-choo!"

*Damn it all. Damn fairies! I didn't think she would actually be strong enough to freeze me, not even for the few seconds that she did.*

Flandre shivered, brushing her chilled arms and rubbing her hands together. She bent down and edged closer to one of the many bright fires that now decorated the forest floor, basking in the warmth. As much as she wanted to hunt down Cirno for this irritating slight she decided it could wait for now. She was feeling cold and miserable. Besides, if that fairy had any sense at all she would have taken the hint and fled by now but then again, she seemed to be a bit on the dull side.

"Ah-choo!"

She sneezed again, throwing her head forward with the effort. The crackling of the fire combined with the loving heat it provided had a calming influence on her. *I have a runny nose and no tissues on me and my clothing is all cold and damp and my skin tingles.*

"Damn it all."

Kicking a nearby rock in annoyance, she stood up straight and stretched her back, holding both arms up to the night sky. Burning patches of ash floated in the air like black rain. A strong breeze started to blow in from the south, fanning the flames and tugging at her dress. *Is that a voice I hear, carried on the wind? There it is again. Louder this time.* Glancing up, she saw that now familiar blue shape flying on the skyline just above the forest treetops.

"-o the forest," Flandre just about managed to make out as Cirno came into earshot.

Seeing that irritating fairy again seemed to help raise Flandre's temperature even more so than the surrounding inferno she had created. It fueled the vampires sense of irritation. Flandre glowed like a hot furnace, her temper threatening to overcome her. It made the humiliation and discomfit of being frozen all the more difficult to bare. This was unacceptable, completely unacceptable!

Her fingers flinched. Her fangs extended, joining the rest of her teeth in a snarl. Good thing you came back. *Saving me the trouble of having to track you down might just earn you some mercy.* A slight smile crossed her lips despite the horrible mood that she was in. Part of her was glad that Cirno had unwisely chosen to return. Resuming the danmaku duel would help to brighten her mood and give her the chance for a little payback. Just the thing she needed to forget the fact that she was freezing cold.

"Look what you have done to the forest! Look at it!" Cirno repeated, close enough to hear now. Flandre kicked one of the smoking logs in contempt and sneered at the fairies concern.

"You shouldn't have pulled a dirty trick like that. If you play with fire then you're going to get burned."

"Poor Mr forest. What did he ever do to hurt you?" Cirno swept her arm out, indicating the scene of destruction that stretched all around her.

"Fairies and animals live around here. Plus its an important playground of mine. What if you hurt someone? Maybe you did hurt someone! You'd better say you're sorry!"

"There's still plenty of forest left. Besides, you're not my sister. You have no right to tell me what to do. If you want me to apologize then make me." Flandre shook her head and shrugged. "That is, if you can." Cirno's face flushed red at this taunt; she stuck her tongue out in retaliation.

"Maybe I will."



Flandre detected a build up of spiritual power within Cirno. A raw, untamed power. It made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. *Not bad, fairy. Lets see what kind of spell card you can muster.* Flandre, with some effort had held her anger in check so that she could experience some more of the little pixie's tricks. She had worked hard on this discipline so that her fights didn't end too quickly but everyone has their breaking point.

Gleaming slabs of ice began to form in the sky all around Cirno, bulking up immensely by absorbing the moisture in the air. At the same time, snow-like white bullets started to fall from the heavens like hail, only a few at first but their numbers continued to steadily increase.

"Hyperborean tempest," Cirno called out.

The rather amateurish barrage started to hit the scorched earth with a repeated thump thump thumping sound. Flandre decided to take to the air so that she wasn't a sitting duck. The blizzard of bullets was not very challenging for her to avoid and she made a great show of moving just enough so that they sailed over her head or pulling her limbs in at the last moment of impact. When multiple shots came at her at once, instead of taking the easy option of climbing above them, Flandre weaved straight through them as though they didn't even exist.

"Is this all there is too it?" she called as she continued to effortlessly slip past Cirno's speeding attacks. "I can do this all night."

Grinning, Cirno replied "Nope, you wish."

The ice balls had now swelled to many times their original size. They resembled the grand domes of palaces in terms of size but were completely transparent, made up as they were out of hardened ice. The first of them entered the fray, its course firmly set on Flandre.

It lumbered into range, picking up momentum as it swatted aside the smaller projectiles in its quest to engulf everything in its path. The

sound that accompanied it was the tune of something monolithic which became louder as the giant ice ball spun its slow spin towards her. Flandre tried her best to move out of its path but the smaller angel white bullets closed in on either side of her, closing her off.

"Humfp!" she grunted. Not going to trap me with something this clumsy Cirno.

Flandre fanned her wings out, gliding across on the air currents, pushing herself feet first with the immense icy planet that blocked out everything else from view. Its shadow loomed over Flandre, cutting off the comforting sight of the moon, the stars, everything. As soon as she felt her shoes hit the ice, she started to run across its surface while carefully matching her speed to the colossal orb's rotation in order to avoid losing her footing. Flandre kicked up a cloud of ice particles as she went so that it looked like a dust storm of blue and white glitter was rippling across the enormous mass of frozen water.

"Yahoooo!" Flandre screamed in excitement as she reached the top. There she saw many more of the mountain sized icebergs closing in on her from every direction. They may be big, but the force of gravity was that much stronger as it pulled them back down to earth. That combined with Cirno urging them towards her meant that Flandre was forced to leap as two of them collided into the one Flandre had just vacated. The impact was like a bomb going off, a loud shape crack that shook the trees to their very roots. The ice giants smashed themselves into smithereens, instantly creating a swirling blizzard of many large and small fragments which glittered with multiple reflections.

Flandre landed on the next planet, crunching ice crystals underfoot and began to race up it's side, using her wings to ensure that she didn't fall off even at this impossibly unnatural angle. *I'm coming Cirno. Just hold on a few more moments while I deal with your little spell card.* She hadn't gone more than a few paces before she started to slow down as something began to cling and grab at her feet. *What the hell?*

She looked down in surprise to see that ice was swarming over her feet like a fleet of insects. It was swallowing up her feet at an alarming rate in an attempt to glue her securely in place. "Get off me, stupid ice!"

The blue glass had engulfed her shoes and was now working its way up her lower legs, stopping her dead in her tracks. Flandre struggled but couldn't break free as any ice she shattered formed back almost instantly and she was further handicapped by the fact that using excessive force might severely damage her own legs. Cirno appeared overhead, looking down at her captive on her prison of ice.

"Looks like I caught you again," she taunted. Flandre could see the smug expression on her stupid face. Misplaced confidence indeed. "Better give up before they all go BOOM!"

At with that, all the remaining massive constructs of ice suddenly closed in on her, menacing in their sheer size and destructive power. If she stayed where she was, then even a vampire like her would be crushed into total oblivion by the cataclysmic clash of worlds. The potential danger made things much more exhilarating.

Focusing volatile energy towards her lower body, she calmly replied "You couldn't catch a cold, fairy." The ice beneath her started to sizzle and melt, cooking under the intense heat generated by her monstrous aura. Flandre's feet began to sink into the ice itself as steaming water pored from the wound like transparent blood. In her hand, she summoned her trusty weapon, Lævateinn. A twisted nightmarish weapon with heartlike shaped blades at either end.

Flandre had burned her way into the center, a freezing tunnel full of steam and melting ice stretched up far above her. Holding Lævateinn out in front of her in a firm double handed grip, Flandre uttered a few eldritch words which flew from her mouth and took shape with a mind of their own, wrapping themselves around Lævateinn. Enriching it with potent energies which crackled across its length. Black lightening flickered as Flandre tightened her grip on its shaft.

Outside, Cirno could see the strange blackness shimmering in the core of the ice giant and wondered what it could possibly mean. With the other enormous spheres only moments from crashing into one another, shouldn't she be trying to get away instead of messing around?

Cirno gasped and was forced to shield her eyes when the globe unexpectedly exploded into diamond dust, launching out large chunks of debris the size of buildings while at the same time pelting the surrounding area with smaller icy hail stones. The roaring explosion created a mighty shockwave of freezing cold air pressure that was so strong that it knocked the remaining spheres away like they weighted nothing, sending them springing off in random directions like a pinball machine. Those that struck the ground flattened everything underneath them into pancakes while others simply disintegrated into their component elements.

Cirno struggled not to be overtaken by the tremendous gale. She frantically tried to spot her adversary from between tightly closed fingers which were shielding her face and eyes. A shadow appeared behind her as if from nowhere.

"Surprise!", yelled Flandre before she swung Lævateinn in a mesmerizing arch that smacked Cirno down with the crackling aura instead of the sharp blade itself.

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!" Cirno yelled as she spun around uncontrollably in a terminal dive, rocketing towards the rapidly approaching earth. The land below loomed closer and closer. If she didn't do something she would be flattened into crushed ice.

"Damn it all, I'm n-not-" she garbled as her mouth was flapping about in the wind. "G-going to lose!"

Cirno spun around with a burst of energy and created a slide of ice with her hands which glistened with its pure looking radiance. It snaked downwards, taking its creator with it as she desperately formed the makeshift slide in her path moments before travelling

across its surface. Kind of like a road just magically appearing a second before taking a step.

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaa!" the fairy yelled again, her feet slipping and sliding like a surfer struggling to ride a big wave. She hung on for dear life until she finally reached the ground, speeding like a missile before she tripped on something unseen which caused her to roll, twirl and then tumble comically across the earth, resembling a blue beachball.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow," Cirno moaned, bumping about like a ragdoll until she collided right into a rather solid looking tree. Bump! A downpour of burnt leaves sprinkled down, many carried along on the wind until they rested upon the ice fairy. She looked pitiful, with her legs in the air and her dress hanging over her head, covering up the scatterbrained look on her face as her eyes rolled about in their sockets. She garbled something but her speech came out distorted and unintelligible.

Flandre set down beside her, Lævateinn still in her left hand. She used it to prod Cirno inquisitively. "Hey, are you done? Hey? Hey? Can you hear me."

Flandre reached down and cautiously pulled Cirno upright, wary for any possible traps. When she saw the dizzy look on Cirno and the way she mumbled gibberish she let her guard down a little and relaxed. Flandre let out a sigh and rested the little troublemaker up against a nearby tree stump that had been blacken to a crisp. So that's it huh?

She wasn't angry anymore as the danmaku duel had satisfied her destructive appetite for now. The dark Lævateinn joined the rest of the night and faded away. Well, that was fun. She started to walk away. If there are powerful fairies out here in the outside world, then who knows what other adventures still await the brave adventurer from the Scarlet Devil Mansion. She smiled at the thought. The night was still young after all.

"Hey," came a weak voice behind her. "Whear do yer think yer.. you're guing," said Cirno, her speech coming out in random slurred blurts. She looked drunk but it was just the effects of a light concussion. Well, fairies have pretty thick heads after all so the most this fairy will feel is a bad headache. Flandre continued to walk away and started humming a tune to herself.

"HMMMMMMMM, hummmm, hum-hummmmmmm."

Cirno raised up a finger at the blurry rainbow wings that were steadily moving away. "Hey, wait a minute," her voice a little clearer this time.

"Wha... what about our..duel?" Flandre didn't turn back and waved a hand over her shoulder in a dismissive manner. "The duels over. You lost. Get over it."

Cirno growled, wincing as she pushed herself clumsily to her feet. The clear sky blue dress that she wore was torn and dirty and her hair was all dusty and had loose leaves, twigs and patches of soot in it. She looked kind of like a bird-nest to Flandre who sniggered at the comparison.

"Hey, wait a minute here. I didn't lose, I just need to catch my breath for..." She placed her hands on her knees and took a series of deep breaths before looking up again. "Hey wait a minute. Where are you going? Stop!"

Flandre ignored her, she could feel other spirits nearby. Agitated spirits. More fairies by the feel of it. Urgh. Forget that. Better make a move and find a fresh new playground elsewhere. Ah, better not forget my bag before I leave.

Cirno crumpled like a deck of cards on the soft dirt and started to thump the earth with her fist in a childish tantrum. A tear rolled down her cheek which was a cobalt crystal colour. She stuck her tongue out before licking her hand which was a little sore in places.

\*Sniff\*

"You're just like that red Miko who just takes off in the middle of a duel. I can still win but nobody gives me the chance. They just get afraid and-"

Cirno heard two shoes tap the ground. She stopped her sentence dead and jumped in shock when she realized that Flandre was now looming right over her, her expression one of keen interest. Cirno crawled backwards a little. Flandre was leaning forwards with her hands behind her back, wearing a creepy looking smile.

"W-what do you want?" Stuttered Cirno. "You want to fight?"

"What were you saying about a Miko?"

Cirno snorted, puffing up her face. "Why should I tell you anything after what you did to the forest?"

Flandre's smile widened.

"Oh? I don't remember doing anything. Look around you. Your little ice spheres seem to have done a nice little number on the surrounding woodland. Anyway, won't you answer my question? Pretty please?"

Something in the way she smiled unnerved Cirno so she decided to play ball. That, and she could see one of the many massive blast craters that that Flandre had indicated. Suddenly, she started to act all sheepishly when she realized that she had probably caused just as much collateral damage as her opponent. She scratched her ear in embarrassment, avoiding eye contact.

"A Miko? Oh, her? I fought her a little while ago, when all that mist business was going on."

"What happened? What did she look like?" Flandre pressed. Cirno flinched back at the intensity of the questioning and the almost

obsessive look on the vampire's face.

"H-huh? Well, I ran into her and wanted to talk but she was being rude. Said she had more important things to do, so I challenged her and drove her off."

Flandre nodded, her blonde ponytail bobbing up and down. Sure you did. "So what did she look like?" asked Flandre.

"What did she look like? Well, she had long black hair with a big red bow and pony tails with these similar red sleeves tied to them. And some square shaped paper stuck to the end of a stick."

Flandre's face lit up. Yes, that sounded just like her. Sister knew where the Miko lived and had visited her on a few occasions but she never took her beloved darling little sister along with her. Flandre wanted a re-match. More for the fun of it then anything else but also perhaps she could hitch a ride to the human world. Haven't been there in so long. Almost several lifetimes away. I bet things are a lot different now. She turned her attention back to the little ice fairy.

"Take me to her."

"Huh?"

"Common, take me to see her."

"But I don't know where she lives."

"Humph. I should have known not to expect anything." Flandre rubbed her chin, thinking. She stared at Cirno for a moment, earning her a perplexed look in return.

"You're coming with me," she stated bluntly, not asking a question. Flandre prodded her forehead like a parent telling off a child. "I beat you so you have to listen to me. Show me something fun that I can do around here. A guide to put it another way."



She grabbed Cirno's arm and thrust her to her feet and begun to drag her along behind her, an unwilling partner. "Hey, wait a minute. I didn't agree to anything," complained Cirno. She struggled, fluttering her icy wings, trying to free herself but the grip on her arm was as tight as a vice.

"Let me go, Youkai!"

"Stop moaning, you don't want to hang around here do you? Not after all the mess you caused."

Cirno was about to tell her that it was her who caused most of it but then she finally noticed what Flandre had noticed before. Many sets of angry looking eyes and luminescent wings glowed in the night between the trees. Fairies, searching for the source of this malicious, wanton destruction. Maybe it would be a good idea to lay low for a while. They would never believe that the troublesome icy fairy had nothing to do with it. Cirno groaned, resigning herself to this stroke of misfortune.

"I can walk by myself you know. Let me go! Anyway, I don't even know your name."

"My name is Flandre. Just Flandre will do." she replied as the two Youkai strode away into the dead of night.

# Sunstone

Flandre and Cirno walked side by side down a path heavy with footfall that cut through most of the heavily forested areas. The night was still as dark and unforgiving as ever and sinister shapes moved in among the trees. Spirit predators that preyed on the weak but they were wary of Flandre and left the two travelers alone.

A night owl hooted above as it woke from its makeshift nest high up above in the trees. Flandre's wings shone faintly in the night. A spot of colour among the surrounding black. If viewing them from a distance they would appear as a colourful collection of diamonds that seemed to hover in midair.

They had made their escape from the scene of their joint destruction before anyone had noticed. The ragged blue fairy skipped along the grassy way, occasionally tugging at her torn and tattered clothing. It annoyed Flandre that the top of Cirno's head reached up almost to the top of her neck. It made her feel short to be so close in height to a fairy.

"So then I froze the ground," Cirno said, dramatically acting out the scene with her hands like a stage performer.

"Then those Oni's chasing me slipped up and fell on their big, smelly butts!" she added with a smile, slapping the palm of her small hand, mimicking the sound.

Cirno, who had either seemingly forgotten or simply didn't care that they had been at each others throats only a few moments before, had bombarded Flandre with tale after tale of her antics in Gensokyo. The little ice fairy was full to the brim of yarns of her heroic deeds. The theme mostly consisted of getting herself into various forms of mischief and the resulting fallout.

"They shouted mean things at me and chased me away but they shouldn't have been so greedy in my opinion. They had plenty of food and drink, no reason not to share any. They're always drunk anyway! "

Flandre nodded half-heartedly. That made the fifth story so far. She had only innocently asked about what Gensokyo was like on the outside, not knowing that it would prompt the fairy to spill out enough stories to fill a book. Still, eager as she was to learn about the outside world that had been closed off to her for most of her long, near eternal life, Flandre listened attentively to the often outlandish tales. She scratched behind her ear and felt something soft embedded in her soft, blonde hair.

She frowned and pulled it out. It was a old red leaf, the green worn away with age. She rustled her hair under her hat, suddenly feeling dirty all of a sudden. This rough living would take some getting used to after having servants to attend to her every need for so long.

"Anyway, forget about that. Here's a much more fun story. Let me tell you about the time-" Cirno began before Flandre rapidly looked up from fumbling with her golden locks to cut Cirno off before she got started again.

"Why don't you tell me about some fun places around here?" she said, readjusting her hat while sighing inwardly with relief that she had managed to change the subject at last.

"Fun places? The misty lake is pretty fun! You can fly around and freeze things or try to sneak past the door guard of the Scarlet devilish castle. We take bets to see who can make it the furthest."

*Devilish castle? Sister would scowl so hard if she heard someone refer to her beloved home like that. She was very houseproud. But why did Cirno bring it up. Does she secretly know who I am or did she just mention my home by chance?*

"I was thinking of places away from the mansion," Flandre said, carefully gauging the fairy's reaction.

"Hmm. Well in that case... There's the nightly market. The oni bar is always open but its a rough place and not very friendly at all. Stupid place is full of meanies. Hmm. The crystal garden is not far from here. You can find some valuable stuff there but its a dangerous place."

Flandre pulled out her purse which felt annoyingly light in her hand. She never did get much of an allowance. Sister always said that there was no point since she never had anything to spend it on. It always irritated her that Remillia could say that while surrounded by her lavish and gaudy surroundings.

She was about to ask if Cirno had any coin but one look at her simple dirty blue dress held the words firmly within her mouth. Flandre glanced at Cirno from the corner of her eye and couldn't help but giggle, amused at herself for being suspicious of such a scatterbrain. Cirno noticed.

Flandre raised her eyebrows. Nobody at the mansion was so squeamish about blood. Well, what can you expect with fairies?

"Well, I'm a vampire and need it. Besides, it tastes soooooooo good."

Flandre placed a hand on her chest and traced the blood as it flowed down her gullet towards her stomach. She closed her eyes as the familiar memory of her favourite thing in the world appeared in her mind like a long lost friend, so vivid that she could taste the memory on her tongue.

"You can feel it warm embrace as it travels down your throat, spreading to every inch of your body. Filling you with life's pure essence." Flandre was just repeating something that Remilia had said in the past but Cirno didn't need to know that particular tidbit of information.

Cirno frowned, not looking very convinced. Flandre smiled and thrust the blood red bottle towards Cirno's face just to tease her. The adorable look of revulsion twisting across the fairy's face was just begging for Flandre to bully her.

"No!" Cirno yelled as she turned her head away like it was some kind of deadly poison but Flandre persisted and waved the bottle in front of her mouth, acting like a parent trying to feed a difficult child.

"Come on Cirno, try some," she teased in an exaggerated tone, clearly enjoying the look of distaste that Cirno displayed.

"No, no, get it away from me. Its gross!" Cirno had her eyes squeezed shut and her mouth clamped up tightly, as if it would protect her somehow. She waved her arms in protest, flailing around in a blind flurry of blows. Her hands hit the bottle and knocked it out of the vampires hand. Flandre gasped in horror and dived to the floor, catching the precious liquid before any of its nourishing contents was lost. She stood up, angry, glaring at her fairy companion.

"What do you think your doing? she snapped.

"Its your fault," Cirno accused. "Stop pointing that icky stuff at me."

"You should be glad that I offered you some. Anyway, you're really lucky that I managed to catch it."

Flandre smiled threateningly, running her finger across the glass container. "Otherwise I might have you replace it." She wasn't serious about that but the icy fairy didn't know that. In any case, Cirno seemed unconcerned. In fact she was smiling right back at her.

"My blood is far too cold for a vampire. You wouldn't like it one bit," she countered. "Besides, take a look at your dress."

She pointed at the vampires scarlet red dress, giggling like a child. Flandre followed her gaze and inhaled sharply as she saw the brown muddy streaks that now stained her favourite, formerly beautiful red dress. She started brushing it frantically with her free hand but the only thing that that accomplished was to dirty her hand and push mud under her fingernails.

*I didn't even bring a change of clothes with me. Damn it all.*

"The dirt won't come off."

She looked up at Cirno's stupid smirking face, her wings emitting a faint blue glow in the dark gloomy forest. A multitude of options flashed through her mind in an instant, not all of them were nice but in the end she settled for stabbing an accusing finger at her antagonist.

"Hey Cirno, this is your fault. Clean up my dress this instant!" Flandre was far too accustomed to ordering her fairy maids around and automatically did the same to Cirno without even realizing it.

"What? What can I do?" Cirno asked. She pondered for a moment and then had a fairy epiphany. "I know! How about I freeze the mud? The mud will harden. You smash it and watch it drop off and bingo, one clean dress!"

Cirno started her incantation by waving a slender finger above her head. Sparkling aqua coloured lines of power fell from her finger like silk and traced out a trail of light in the dark air. Flandre hastily held up a hand in protest.

"Whoa, hold it! You'd better not try any of that common magic on me! Freezing my dress? Don't be silly."

Cirno's cheeks flushed red. She took out her frustration on a nearby tree by freezing solid one of its lower branches in annoyance. It broke off its parent tree and shattered below on the forest floor.

"Suit yourself," she grumbled quietly, then in a louder voice Cirno added, "so where are we going anyway?"

"What?" Flandre snarled, leaning forwards. "WHAT? I've been following you, you're the guide for heavens sake. You mean to tell me that you've been following me all this time? I asked you to take me to the market place."

Cirno backed away, startled by this sudden outburst but she quickly regained her composure. She balled her little hands into fists and gave Flandre a stern look, like a cornered pup baring its fangs.

"Hey, don't shout at me. I was just trying to help you out. I even told you many of my popular stories! You should be thankful, not angry at me all the time."

Flandre scoffed at the idea that those tales could ever be considered popular but she sucked in a huge breath and with some effort, let it slide over her head. She needed a guide after all and while this fairy seemed even less capable then those that resided within the mansion at least she had some knowledge of the outside world judging by her myriad of stories.

*Well, at least I hope she does when she's actually focused on the task. Also, assuming at least some of those stories are true.*

Flandre readjusted her frilly hat while actively averting her gaze from Cirno. She had the feeling that just looking at her clueless face would just make her feel even more flustered than she was already.

"So where exactly are we?"

Before Cirno could answer, the stillness of the forest was ended with a flash of bright light followed by a large booming explosion. The sudden blinding flash projected the tall shadows of the trees like a puppet theatre. The ground shook for a brief moment, shaking the two girls on their feet. Flandre stopped her hat falling off with a firm

hand. Another blast shook the earth, driving a bird from its nest in a chorus of agitated squawks.

Cirno looked at Flandre, a cautious apprehension appearing within her clear blue eyes.

The source of this sudden blast was not far from here. The cause of which had pinged the vampire's curiosity. It could have been countless things but whatever it was it certainly beat wondering about the forest in circles. Flandre put a finger to her lips and beckoned her fairy companion to follow.

Spreading her wings, Flandre flew close to the ground, using the air currents as much as possible to mask her presence. Cirno caught on and did the same. Flandre was impressed with her icy little friend. If she hadn't already known where to look, she may never even noticed her presence.

Another crack of thunder filled Flandre's ears. They were close now. She could taste the bitter ash of flames and see the burning yellow and red mixture ahead. It seemed to be a battle but between who she couldn't say.

"Hey, what's going on," Cirno asked, her breath so icy cold on her neck that Flandre thought someone had dumped a bag full of ice cubes down her neck. She jerked in surprise and glanced back in the air to face the troublesome fairy. "Don't sneak up on me like that," she replied, keeping her voice down.

"Isn't sneaking the point of this," Cirno countered, grinning.

Flandre was dumbfounded for a moment, then she shook her head without saying a word and hovered over to the closest tree nearest to the flickering flames. She stuck her head over the side, her blonde ponytail sticking out like some wild animal crawling up the tree-trunk. Her blood red eyes peiced through the darkness in those places not illuminated by the fire. She had been careful not to pick such an area as her hiding place.



An old looking man in a royal blue robe with golden trim stood alone in the middle of the forest. He was holding a wooden cane in one withered hand which must be a magical staff since he looked so much like a wizard from one of Flandre's story books. He didn't have a long gray beard but everything else checked out.

Not far from him, on the forest floor, was a blackened, smoldering patch of ground which was completely devoid of grass. Flandre could make out the charred remains of burnt clothing, scorched bones and the smoking remains of limbs. The faint scent of cooked blood was on the wind. Clearly whoever had fought or attempted to flee from the old man had failed.

Something caught her eye, something bright and circular. It was laying on the grass away from the old wizard who seemed to be looking for it judging from his movements. Cirno was tugging on her dress but Flandre only had eyes for the shining object. From here she could see that it was golden and had a mild sheen to it. A mysterious circle that contained some kind of attraction that compelled Flandre in a way that she couldn't explain.

I want it, she thought as the old wizard, who looked disgruntled at the perpetual darkness surrounding him, conjured up a magical green fire to aid him. It hovered above his staff, bathing everything in a neon green glow.

*I want it, I want it, I want it.*

Cirno tugged again impatiently. "Who's that guy?" she asked.

"I want it," Flandre breathed.

"Huh?"

"I want that shiny object. That thing on the ground over there. That wizard is looking for it so it must be valuable. He even killed for it. When I go for it, I want you to follow me in that direction."

Flandre pointed exactly where she meant so that Cirno wouldn't misunderstand. As she did so, her ears picked up a sigh of relief on the wind. The wizard, aided with his green flame, had found the object and was in the process of walking towards it, his flowing robes trailing in his wake.

"Hey, wait a minute-" Cirno began before Flandre burst out of her hiding place and zoomed across the air, her wings glowing fiercely as they propelled her at blinding speeds.

Flandre's blonde hair ruffled wildly in the wind. Her gaze firmly locked on the object with single-minded determination. She outstretched her grasping fingers, her sharp nails extending themselves as the prize drew near.

The wizard supported himself with his staff and with a groan, bent down to pick up his prize, muttering to himself about how much trouble he had gone through to find it. Flandre rocketed past him with the force of a comet, snatching it right from under his fingers and knocking him flat on his butt. He blinked away the colourful after-images of Flandre's wings before he realized just what had happened.

"Hey," he shouted, "come back here!" but as he wheeled around, his staff crackling with lightening, he saw nothing living at all. He did however see a few branches disturbed by something passing by them.

Elsewhere, Cirno had met up with Flandre and both of them were speeding through the forest at a healthy speed. Neither of them had any problems dodging the maze of trees even as they loomed up in front of them like a maze of stone columns.

A seconds lapse in judgement could see either of them slam headfirst into a hard tree-trunk but both of them were far too practiced to let that happen. Flandre did a midair barrel roll, laughing with the refreshing wind flowing through her hair. Leaves floated down from above, the forest's rain. One landed on Cirno's nose and

was instantly plastered to her face with the wind pressure but was quickly frozen with an annoyed glance and fell away like a icy tear.

After they had travelled a fair distance, Flandre chose to stop down in a tall redwood tree which had a commanding view of a deep overgrown valley below. The sound of rushing water could be heard not far from here. Strange looking fruit hung from the branches. It looked like a green and purple banana but Flandre resisted her curiosity. Might be poisonous for all she knew. Instead, she examined every conceivable angle of her newly won prize by turning it over carefully within her fingers.

Cirno was only a few seconds behind and her arrival was marked with a cold breeze which made Flandre wrinkle her nose. She joined Flandre up in the high branches, her face a mask of wonder and curiosity at the object her companion held. The vampire had her back to Cirno, blocking her view. Grumbling, she hovered closer and reached out to touch it but Flandre slapped her hand back.

"No touching," Flandre snapped.

"Come on Flandre, at least let me see it. Don't be such a hog!"

Flandre looked over her shoulder suspiciously but eventually turned around and held the object in plain view. Cirno inched her face closer, her eyes drinking in the sight before her. It had a wonderful golden sheen to it but it didn't look like simple metal to Cirno.

It comfortably sat in Flandre's palm, its six sided hexagonal shape smooth against her fingertips which she traced around the intricate carvings which decorated its surface like a rich tapestry. It had a hollow hole in the middle and radiated a faint charge which Flandre could feel in her hand. It was a pleasant feeling, the same feeling that you got from warming your hands near an open fireplace. Its backside had a number of sockets engraved into it, suggesting that it was part of something bigger.

"Let me hold it," Cirno asked, pushing a branch chock-full of the strange fruit out of her way so she could move in front of Flandre who clutched the object protectively. The vampire frowned and shook her head.

"No, you might drop it. Besides, I found it. Finders keepers."

"Hey, you stole it from that old guy."

"Who stole it from that dead... whoever," Flandre finished. "But I might let you hold it if you eat one of those fruits," she added, pointing to the branch next to her. That's just what I need, she thought, a fairy taste tester. Sakuya once told her that they taste test anything suspect before it was presented to Sister. Cirno looked at the fruit, her face twisting at the sight.

"I'm not eating that rubbish," Cirno mumbled. "Probably poisoned or something."

She prodded it tentatively with her finger but jerked her hand back quickly at the slimy texture, wiping it on a nearby leaf. Flandre giggled at the sight.

"Stupid yucky jelly fruit," Cirno snapped, cringing. The fruit however seemed to react to being touched and started to bloat and release a foul smelling cloud which set off all the other fruit in a horrifying chain reaction. Flandre held her hands tightly to her mouth, coughing at the noxious gas.

The sound of each fruit popping sounded like the bursting call of a water balloon. Splat, splat, splat it went like a organic firing squad. Each explosion scent millions of harmful spores floating throughout the air. The orange mist made her eyes water and she blindly stumbled about on the thick, circular tree-trunk. She batted fiercely at the air while grasping an overhanging branch to steady herself.

"W-what did you-" she managed to ask before becoming overcome by another coughing fit. Flandre's face turned a silky shade of green

not unlike her emerald crystal wing.

Cirno's cheeks bulged, full of whatever she had had for lunch that evening. The fairy retched hard, emptying the contents of her stomach all over the forest floor below. The air was now tinged with a strange orange colour and smelled like a garbage heap. Flandre squinted her left eye open and grabbed Cirno's arm, pulling her out of the trees tendrils which seemed to reach out to try and halt her escape. That was the mental picture in her mind as she forcibly pushed them out of the gas cloud and out into the welcoming open air.

Flandre opened her mouth and sucked in huge lungfuls of lovely fresh oxygen. It was like drinking the most exquisite wine from Sister's valuable wine cellar. Cirno was likewise breathing hard like it was her first time, holding a hand to her chest, occasionally coughing the foul substance out of her lungs.

"What... was that?" Flandre spluttered when she had recovered to some extent.

"The defensive measure employed by the Germa tree to ward off intruders," replied a raspy voice from below. The wizard had found them. Flandre and Cirno were still feeling the effects of the poison and found it difficult to fly so they both drifted downwards to the ground.

Flandre's vision was hazy and a light show of shadowy black shapes danced in front of her as she strained her eyes to see. Cirno wasn't fairing much better, rubbing her watering eyes and scratching at her skin. Her dress was even more dirty then before and had become discoloured from its time inside the cloud.

Flandre conjured up some water to wash her eyes with. She flinched at the biting coldness. Cirno sneezed, cursing the strange banana tree. Through the haziness, Flandre could see the wizard as he held his hand out expectedly. When nothing happened he stomped his staff on the ground impatiently.

"I think you have something that belongs to me," he stated in a guff voice that sounded like gravel. "Hand it over peacefully and I may act leniently."

Flandre shook her head to help banish the fog from her mind and slapped her cheeks with both hands. She spat on the ground, staring daggers at the old man with a single, opened bright red eye. Her chest still heaved rapidly but her breathing was returning to normal after sucking in the refreshing, crystal clear air of the night.

"Not gonna happen, wizard. You took it from that Youkai and I took it from you. Now its mine and its going to stay that way."

Flandre Scarlet pointed at him, enjoying the look of outrage she could see on his twisted, wrinkled features. "Why don't you just buzz off?"

"You dare talk to me like that," he snarled, banging his cane again. "I'll wipe that grin off your face, silly little girl. You don't know who your dealing with. I, Belmorn, master warlock, will make you wish you held your tongue!"

Flandre flashed a wicked smile at that. He was the one who didn't know what he was getting into. Stupid old man probably thinks he has seen it all. Well, she would show him a few new tricks. She took a deep breath to help clear out her slender throat from the toxic clutches of the fowl air before the festivities began.

*Ugh, still feeling a little nauseous.*

Cirno wandered around aimlessly, sneezing and coughing. She stumbled in between the two adversaries, putting herself in the firing line before collapsing on the ground in a heap and sobbing quietly to herself. The earth around her frosted up and cracked under her weight.

"Stupid tree!" she complained to no one in particular. "Why's bad stuff always happen to me?"

Belmorn looked down on the fairy's display with mild irritation. He rubbed at his chin thoughtfully and hit his cane once again on the forest floor to punctuate his words.

"Is this fairy your friend? If you value her life and your own, you will return the sunstone piece to me, post haste. Don't make me ask a second time, because I will not."

Flandre pulled out the object from her bag and held it up in front of her.

So this thing is called the sunstone? Well, this wizard isn't getting it back without a fight but I still feel a little under the weather. I wouldn't enjoy toying with him right now.

Belmorn smiled when he saw the object in Flandre's hands. He nodded smugly, tapping his cane. "Good, good. That's a good girl. Now hand it over."

Flandre waved him over, holding out the sunstone piece temptingly in one hand. She bore an inviting smile, titling her head to the side slightly. The warlock grumbled at the indignity but started to walk over all the same, his feet crunching the soft grass underfoot. Cirno was sniffing, but had come to her senses somewhat and was sitting up cross-legged. Her cheeks were decorated with frozen tears but otherwise she seemed more or less back to normal. She rubbed her cheek drowsily, noticing the old man for the first time.

"Hey, its that old geezer from before," she stated, innocently. The warlock twisted his head towards her and rose his wooden staff which he gripped tightly in his bony fingers.

"Damn imp!" he spat. He didn't get to say anything further as Flandre drew back her arm and sent the sunstone hurtling through the air. It hit Belmorn squarely in the forehead with a satisfyingly loud crunch. Flandre was right there to catch the object as the warlock crumbled to the ground, a giant red mark on his face.

"I don't understand," said Flandre as she juggled the shining sunstone up and down in one hand. "I thought you wanted this?"

She grabbed Cirno by the hand and pulled her across the grass, disappearing into the gloomy forest. She didn't trust herself to fly just yet, her vision still being a little cloudy. Her chest still ached a little but her vampire body was made of sterner stuff. Cirno's arm was frosty to the touch but Flandre put up with it, tugging her companion ever onward. Angry shouts could be heard echoing throughout the forest. Flandre smirked, imagining his raging expression.

"Where are we going? Is that old guy still after us?" Cirno asked.

"I'd put money on it. Let him chase us, for all the good it will do him. I could use some entertainment after wandering through this blank, boring forest for ages."

Flandre was starting to think that the whole of Gensokyo consisted of just one large mass of trees, grass and bushes. There has got to be more out there than this, she hoped.

*Cirno better come up with something or someplace to go otherwise I'd just be better off heading back and messing around with the wizard. I wonder what's happening back at the mansion?*

Cirno was moving more freely now, the effects of the poison having worked their way out of her system. Flandre still held Cirno in her arm, forcing her to keep up with her relentless pace. She still seemed a little groggy, as did Flandre but the vampire pushed it to the back of her mind. The two sped through the trees with the moon over their heads, animals scurrying out of their path. The forest was growing less and less dense the further on they went, and the sound of rushing water could be heard up ahead.

"Flandre, lets stop for a moment. My dress is dirty and my legs ache."



"Stop complaining," Flandre replied, not slowing down nor looking back.

Cirno grumbled something that was lost in the wind as they came to the source of the whooshing lullaby. It was a lake of pure white water which seemed to offer no reflections on its hard surface.

No grass dared to grow along its flanks and the area surrounding it was completely bare with orange rock. Something in the back of Cirno's mind started to alarm her as she recognized the strange scene in front of her as Flandre urge her forwards, not letting up. She meant to jump across it. Cirno's eyes widened with a sudden cold realization.

"Stop, stop, that lake!" she began before Flandre lowered her legs and leapt over the silvery, rippling expanse of liquid, pulling the ice fairy along with her.

"What are you going on about," Flandre asked, her words distorted by her speed, her blonde hair flapping like the sails on a ship. Something slick and slimy wrapped itself around her leg, something even colder than Cirno's frosty skin. It sent a cold shiver up her spine. Whatever it was violently yanked her downwards. She looked down and saw that the white water had coiled itself around her leg and another tentacle had attached itself to Cirno.

Flandre yelled and reached down to smash the shifting water into atoms which freed her leg but the white stuff just reformed and clung to her fist instead. Cirno froze one of the pillars of white but she panicked as three more sprung up to overtake her, working their watery tendrils all over her and dragging her down with relentless strength. Both of them were swallowed up into the depths of the snowy river, disappearing beneath its pale, pallid surface.

# Delusions

"Here is your tea, my lady."

Sakuya sat the richly decorated tea cup down on the table, her movements so slight and graceful that the china cup barely made a sound as it contacted against the soft surface. She was very particular and made sure that the cup faced the correct way as she set it down. Perfection was everything.

Remilia Scarlet sniffed the sweet scent, nodding in approval before picking it up elegantly with one hand and taking a sip. She savoured the refined flavour, swirling the warm liquid around in her mouth before swallowing it down carefully.

"Excellent as always, Sakuya. You always make the most exquisite blends."

Sakuya gave a slight bow and allowed herself a warm smile as she gazed at the pleasing look displayed on her mistress' face. The chief maid admired the way the pale moonlight flooded in from the tall windows which illuminated Remilia in all her splendor, making her appear more radiant than usual.

Remilia was situated in the upper floor dining room which overlooked her mansion's grand garden below. It was the dead of night outside but to Remilia everything was as clear as day. The view of the many flower arrangements, hedge rows and pruned trees never failed to impress.

Fairy maids would currently be busy at work down there as they scurried around in the never ending quest to attend to the mansion's grounds. It required a lot of work but standards must be maintained.

"Sakuya, bring my sister to me if you would be so kind."

Sakuya nodded and performed a short curtsy. "At once, my lady," she said before departing.

Remilia watched her leave, her expression unreadable. The master of the Scarlet Devil Mansion lifted the steaming cup up to her face and gently rocked the tea within back and forth, thinking. Her deep red eyes appeared over the horizon of the china cup like twin burning suns. The brown tea swirled around like a pocket ocean within the palm of her hand. It was some time before Sakuya reappeared with her sister in tow. No doubt she had been troublesome to track down, as usual.

Flandre walked behind Sakuya, staring at the swaying pure white ribbon which was tied neatly around the maid's waste.

*What would happen if I pulled that? Would stuffy Sakuya's dress fall down in front of her beloved mistress or would the human simply unravel altogether?*

Grinning at the thought, her hand started to move almost by itself as she pictured the embarrassment it would cause before she reluctantly reigned herself in.

*Better not. I don't want to ruin this chance to spend time with sister. She might have a surprise for me.*

Flandre blinked as something unsettling nagged in the corner of her mind.

Wait a minute, Flandre realized. These smooth white walls with marble pillars, the blood red carpet that seemed like it could be a gateway to another world, the flickering lamps attached to the walls that burned with eternal flame. She was home, back at the mansion. Since when had she been back at the mansion? Hadn't she been somewhere else?

Flandre tried to think but her mind drew up a blank. The answer was right there, right in front of her but the fog that clouded her mind

stopped her from remembering. It was frustrating. It felt like reaching out for something right in front of you but just failing to place a hand on it. She scrunched up her face in annoyance. Where had she been?

That velvety, refined voice, it could only belong to her cherished, elder sister.

*Ah, sister.*

Flandre's face lit up at the prospect of talking with Remilia like she was a little girl again. She cheered a merry tune quietly under her breath and bobbed her head from side to side, her blonde side pony tail swaying along with her.

I never get to see her very often. I wonder what she wants? Maybe she'll play with me like she used too. That would be so much fun! She always seems to be so busy every time I ask Sakuya. At other times I'm not even allowed out of the mansions depths at all.

Maybe she doesn't love you came a foreboding, familiar voice from within her head. It sounded somewhat like Remilia but was distorted and corrupted, like a mockery of her comforting but regal tone.

*No, that's not true, sister loves me. She does!*

"Ah, my dear Flandre," said Remilia as she looked up and regarded her sister with her intimidating gaze. There didn't seem to be much warmth in her piecing expression. Flandre knew very well what that look meant and her heart sank. It was the look sister had when she was disappointed with her. Sakuya took up a position behind her mistress while folding out a crease in her otherwise perfectly pressed maid uniform.

"What did you want to-" Flandre began before Remilia cut her off with a raised hand, the other reaching down for her tea cup. She took a sip while eyeing Flandre with her scarlet eyes. Her stern stare never leaving her younger sister.

"Ah, Flandre. I wanted to talk to you... well, I should say that I've wanted to talk with you for sometime now regarding this delicate. You see, our father always wanted me to look after you, my younger little sister who always likes to get into trouble and I have done so for many, many years now even after we became vampires. But that trouble only got worse as you betrayed my trust time and time again by abusing your powers in childish ways. We had to leave our home many times because of you, you know that? How do you think that made me feel? Did you even consider my feelings I wonder?"

Flandre looked crestfallen. She tugged at her dress sheepishly, clearly in distress. What had gotten into Remilia? Why was she acting this way? Remilia looked cold and distant as she continued, like the very sight of her younger sister somehow repulsed and repelled her.

"All this time I have been forced to clean up your careless messes like a common servant. I've protected you. Fed and clothed you. Tried to mold you into someone I could be proud to call my sister, someone that wouldn't shame our family name but it seems that even my best efforts have ended in failure. When we came here to Gensokyo I locked you away because I was fed up of having such an annoyance of a little sister. This was my chance to lock away my humiliation, my burden. Having to no longer shoulder that burden has been such a blessing."

By this point, little tears had formed in the corners of Flandre's eyes. She sniffled and tried to fight back the urge to cry her heart out. She knew that showing weakness would only anger her sister still further but she just couldn't help it. Her sister was the only person that could elicit this kind of reaction from her.

Flandre collapsed to the floor, sobbing, vainly holding her arms up against her face so that the onlookers wouldn't be able to see and judge. Remilia tutted at her younger sister's behaviour, shaking her head. Sakuya was likewise disgusted with this lack of etiquette.

"Don't get upset with me. This is the truth. Show yourself to be a true Scarlet for once in your life and pull yourself together. I'm washing my hands with you. I never want to see you again. Not in this lifetime, nor in the next."

No, no, Flandre thought. This was all wrong. Sister loved me, she would never act this way towards me. She was always there with her soothing words when I became too angry. She had always been there right next to me when we were alone. Something was wrong here. Flandre climbed to her feet, fighting back the intense feelings of grief. Her hands were quivering as she glared at her elder sister. Remilia stared back, scrutinizing her every move with a face that screamed disappointment.

"You're not my sister! She would never act this!" Flandre screamed. As those words passed her lips, the beautiful priceless windows smashed with some invisible force, the air flashing with the reflections of a thousand mirrors. Flandre saw Remilia in many of them, each one a different expression.

She could hear the faint sound of rushing water, the fog clouding her mind seemed to part for a fleeting moment. Her eyes widened as she remembered what had happened, the wizard, running through the forest and finally something grabbing at her from below. Suddenly she found it much more difficult to breath, as if something was stealing the air from within her lungs.

The familiar looking mansion scenery flickered and fizzled out and was replaced with a new, more stark reality. She was laying on the cold, waterlogged ground. She pushed herself off the floor unsteadily, her fingers digging into powdery earth. Why did she feel so weak?

Opening her eyes groggily, a white ocean filled her vision. It stretched all around her as far as she could see. Ribbons of swirling white. It was foggy but clear in places and flowed around her standing form weakly, tickling Flandre slightly. It felt like cold ghostly hands were caressing her body through the fabric of her dress.

She took a weary step forwards, then another. This time her foot brushed up against something smooth. Casting her gaze down, Flandre saw that it was a human looking bone. She could see various skulls, animal carcasses and debris littering the floor as the currents weakened momentarily and allowed her a fleeting look at her strange, oppressive looking surroundings.

Flandre coughed, shaking her head. The dizziness that had plagued her during that horrible dream still filled her head. Had that haunting vision of the mansion just been a hallucination? It must have been but it felt more to Flandre like her worst nightmare come true. She tried to look around her in an attempt to ascertain exactly where she was. Her eyes could pierce the mysterious blizzard up to a point but it was like trying to see through a raging snowstorm.

"What is this place?" she screamed. She fought to keep her footing as the phantasmal current increased in strength, threatening to sweep her off her feet. She tilted her crystal wings, creating a pocket of spiritual power which helped to hold her upright. Flandre felt like a living breakwater as she stood resolutely against the onrushing torrent. While weakened, she was still full of boundless energy and wouldn't let this situation get the better of her.

"Get away from me!" she cried, blasting the ever building void away from her with an angry outburst of power. The whiteness nearest to her caught fire and was burned away. Flandre struck out again before she was overwhelmed and seared away the pale blanket surrounding her. It seemed to wail as it died, a sound of distant spirits. Was it alive?

The area around her was now clear and for the very first time, Flandre could trust that what she was seeing was not an illusion. The white water continued to race around the vampire while keeping a healthy distance between them. The swirling mass of chalky tendrils had tasted pain and was clearly wary of a repeat performance. Flandre's eyes widened as she finally pieced together the past events that had so eluded her up until now.

How something wet and slippery had grabbed her out the gloom and dragged her down into the abyss. The river! She was under the river! As Flandre looked up, the distorted outline of trees could be seen through the murky surface of the living lake.

The white water seemed to tire of waiting and darted in to attack, forming pale spears the size of the great columns of stone which held up the scarlet devil mansion. Flandre brought up her hand in a sweeping motion and tore apart the first spear, ripping it to ribbons. Next, she jumped backwards as the white lances above stabbed deep down into the soft riverbed, one after the other. Flandre grasped a rotting log with both hands and hefted it above her head in an impressive display of strength.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed as she swung the crumbling log in an arc which shattered the many javelins rushing towards her into their component tendrils. She spun and smashed a stealthy attacker from behind before throwing what remained of log into the mist while rubbing her hands together at a job well done. She still felt a little light headed and stumbled a little while rubbing at her forehead.

*That will teach... whatever those things are from trying to attack me. Damn it all, I shouldn't be this tired from just swinging around an oversized toothpick. There's something not right about this place. No matter, I'll be leaving this deathtrap soon enough.*

She looked from side to side while yawning with tiredness.

"What an ugly place," she mumbled to herself. "Guess I'd better look for my guide while I'm down here."

Flandre shook her head and readjusted her hat. As she did so, her fingers poked through the expensive fabric and brushed up against her soft, golden locks.

What is this? Holes? My hat! Outraged, she snatched the hat right off her head and cradled it in her arms like a newborn baby. It was



ruined. Her beloved hat was ruined! Looking down, she also noticed something else that left her open mouthed and trembling with anger.

Flandre looked down at her once beautiful dress in shock. It was not only filthy, stained as it was with long streaks of wet mud but it had also been torn in several places and had lost its bright red splendour. That dress was not something that could be easily replaced as it had been a home warming gift when they had first moved into the mansion. It had been presented by Remilia herself and Flandre had chosen it because she had wanted to take a little piece of home with her on her first foray into the outside world.

The vampire let out a sound which could only be described as a low growl and lashed out at the white mass, immolating the nearest mass of tendrils with a simple gesture. At least her favorite cloud patterned bag was still with her, if a little worse for ware.

"You're lucky Cirno is down here somewhere, otherwise I'd immolate this whole retched lake!"

The white ocean seemed to sway and twist, as if reacting to her hateful words. That same wailing sound could be heard but this time it was a little more subdued, almost sorrowful. A path seemed to open up by itself, much like the fiery clearance that Flandre had so recently carved for herself. Straining her eyes, Flandre could just make out the small, fragile looking form of an ice fairy laying on the wet earth in the shimmering distance. Her icy wings reflected the little light that penetrated down here, acting like a beacon in the misty gloom.

Flandre smiled bitterly at the show of compliance and flew down the morphing, flickering corridor. She was still wary of any possible traps that may be sprung but she felt confident that this river had learned what happened when it stood against her. A morbid graveyard of bones, skulls and ribcages passed her by along with rusty armour, wire rimmed glasses and other personal effects. Flandre was thankful that she hadn't ended up as part of this collection of death.

"Smart move, whatever you are," Flandre warned as she glared at the snaking pale corridor, almost as if she was daring it to try something underhanded so that she would have been provided an excuse to unleash her fiery wrath.

Cirno seemed to be in a deep sleep. Perhaps trapped in the same kind of illusion that Flandre had been tormented with. Her chest heaved up and down with labored breathing. Flandre bent down and collected up the fairy in her arms, noting how light her cold form felt in her arms. So small and frail these fairies seemed to be, yet this one was so full of energy.

*Maybe I should be more careful with the maids when I return home?*  
She grinned. *Maybe, maybe not.*

Up above, the forest continued on as normal. Animals hunted in the night, ghostly forms huddled in the bushes and furry critters slept underneath the earth, waiting patiently for sunrise. The night was still young. The moon in the sky was still watching over her as it cast it pale light downwards on the ground below.

"Come on," said Flandre as she lightly nudged the sleeping fairy.  
"Wake up! Come on!"

Her fairy friend mumbled something but didn't rouse from her dreamy state. Flandre slapped her cheek. When that proved unsuccessful, she pinched her cold skin which caused Cirno to moan and shuffle about a little but didn't knock her out of the delusional state that had been inflicted upon her.

Ugh, this is ridiculous. Nothings working. Well, I guess I'll have to resort to something a little more electrifying.

"Thunder, heed my will!"

Flandre carefully and slowly pressed her little finger up against Cirno's leftest most toe, making sure only her long sharp fingernail was in contact. Next the vampire sent a small current of electricity

coursing throughout her body. The effect was instantaneous. The icy fairy's eyes snapped open, her whole body suddenly jerking upwards in shock.

"Ahhhh, w-what, w-whats go-going-" she sputtered, looking around in a drunken daze. A hand tapped her forehead. She focused on the person in front of her, trying to place the familiar blonde haired face.

"Hello," Flandre asked. "Anyone home?" She grasped Cirno by the shoulders and started to shake her like a blue bottled fizzy drink.

"Snap out of it Cirno! Hello? I'm talking to you!"

Cirno tried to voice something but it turned into meaningless gaggle as Flandre relentlessly shook her senseless. She weakly tried to pry away the tight fingers holding her but the world around Cirno was spinning like a roller-coaster. Flandre noticed her face turn an even paler shade of white than normal as a direct result of her gallant efforts to help Cirno and was just quick enough to evade the puke avalanche which erupted from the bewildered pixy.

"S-stop shaking m-me!" Cirno said, rising dizzily to her feet while holding her arms to her mouth. Flandre meanwhile was thankful that she had avoided that barf bath. She winced and looked away from the revolting substance that now decorated the forest floor. Of all the things that had happened today, that would have been the icing on the cake. Flandre sat down, finally feeling the weight of everything that had happened so far which served to drag her down to earth like a sack of bricks.

She pulled out her blood bottle while she waited for Cirno to stop flailing around like a drunken money. Ah, blood. If there was one thing that could cheer Flandre up while also energizing her like a bolt of lightening it was the sweet, refreshing taste of blood. This particular blend had been prepared by her fairy attendants and boasted a nice, thick texture that seemed to cling to the inside of her throat. She drank deeply from the bottle, chugging it down until she

had drained almost half of its contents. A dribble of crimson ran down the side of her mouth.

"Ah, sooooo good," she purred, wiping at her chin. An excellent vintage.

Having finished indulging herself, she looked up at Cirno expectantly. Said fairy had managed to finally shake away most of the cobwebs clogging up her brain. She shook her head, her icy blue hair swaying back and forth. Flandre grabbed her hand and they started to move away, hopefully in the direction that would lead her out of the forest or at least to a place of interest.

"Hey, where are you dragging me? I'm still feeling a little woozy here. Treat me with a little more concern."

"Stop complaining. And you'd better not puke on me."

"I won't as long as you don't shake me again. I may be the strongest fairy, but I'm not a toy so you should stop treating me like one. Hey, are you even listening to me?"

As soon as Cirno had recovered her marbles enough to fly, the two left the ghostly lake behind and rapidly shot through the last hectares of the forest, more through blind luck than any of Cirno's unreliable directions. Along the way, Cirno explained that the white river had in fact been a collection of spirits that masqueraded as a tranquil body of water to lure in its unsuspecting prey and suck them dry of any spiritual energy that they might possess.

There were many more forces of nature such as that that had developed to life inside Gensokyo, some of them extremely dangerous and Cirno had been quick to boast that as long as Flandre stuck with her then she would have nothing to worry about.

*Great, now all I have to concern myself with is Cirno herself.*

Flandre admired the view from up above as they both glided across the sky. The maze of trees, plants and bushes became less and less dense as they traveled until at last they came across a well trodden path which was wide enough for old, rickety carts and cattle to use. The road was made with a sandy coloured stone and was bordered on both sides by overlooking trees, being as it was, still close to the main body of the forest.

"I know this road!" declared Cirno confidently.

"Really?" replied a rather sceptical Flandre, arching an eyebrow.

"Yeah really, I may have gotten lost before but this is definitely the yellow road that runs on the outskirts of the forest. All we need to do is follow it, they have signs along the way. Its foolproof!"

Flandre almost chuckled at the phrase foolproof when it was mouthed from the fairy's lips.

"Well, what direction should we take? Left or right?"

Cirno stared at the two opposite ends of the road, seemingly lost in thought as the wind caressed her wavy hair. Flying above provided her with a good vantage point with little to block her view. She scratched the end of her nose, her ocean blue eyes working their magic.

Flandre knew where this was going so without wasting any more time she slowed down her pace and drifted down to tree level. She snatched off a twig and threw it onto the leaf covered earth. It landed softly on the grass, pointing more to the left than the right. That was good enough for her.

"We're going left," announced Flandre. Cirno was still pondering and glanced around to see multicoloured crystals moving away from her down the road. They jingled up and down until they were swallowed up by the night.

"Hey wait up, don't leave me behind!"

Flandre grew tired of flying so they decided to walk for a little while so she could examine the changing landscape more closely. Her active imagination painted grand pictures of talking trees, fire breathing dragons and hidden treasures but the most intriguing thing she came across was an abandoned, rusting old horseshoe. Flandre sighed.

They followed the road for a good amount of time while making sure to stay away from any more white masses of water. The outside world seemed like a dangerous place alright. Why, even travelling across the lake right next to the mansion had seen Flandre get attacked by a giant cappa.

*Well excitement was what I was after so I shouldn't complain and I'm certainly having new experiences by the second out here. This wild, perilous place named Gensokyo. Nothing like the comfortable, easy-going and at times boring mansion lifestyle at all.*

"Hey, there's a sign up ahead."

Cirno snapped Flandre out of her thoughts. There was indeed an old sign up ahead. A rusty old piece of metal bolted to a black pole. As they approached, no writing could be seen upon its surface.

"Well that's stupid. What's the point of a sign without any markings?," remarked Flandre. "Unless its something posing as a sign."

Yes, that must be it. Just like that stupid lake! Moronic spirits trying to pray on powerful vampires. I'll show them!

Flandre snarled and raised her hand, pointing her finger at the sign post with a shimmering amber light at it's tip. Cirno saw what she was about to do and frantically waved her arms in protest.

"Stop, stop. These sign posts are magical and react to a living presence. Don't tell me you've never seen one before?" Cirno

chuckled to herself. "You really don't know anything, huh? Luckily for you I'm know everything there is to know around these parts."

Flandre frowned and shot Cirno a harsh look, pressing her teeth together. Being talked down to by a fairy was insulting enough by it's own right. She struggled and curtsied mockingly.

"Excuse me then. Go ahead and prove it."

"You should always listen to us fairies. We know the forest well."

Cirno hovered over to the sign which reacted to her aura immediately, glowing faintly in places but nothing that could be called a word. Cirno grumbled and kicked the pole.

Flandre walked calmly over to the malfunctioning signpost, sensing the mild and distant energy that pulsed weakly within it. If energy was the problem then she could certainly rectify that particular problem. She placed a slender hand on the post's surface and flinched as she felt a little tingle pass along her arm. Cirno was about to ask what she was up to but before she had the chance, Flandre enriched the post with an enormous amount of raw power. The sign came alive and began to shine brightly, the common words appearing magically in purple, swirling forms.

"Nightly market, north, 200 paces, watch out for night hunters," read Flandre. She turned to Cirno, her hand still attached to the post, pumping in energy.

"See fairy? You just need a little intuition."

"Hmmm, Flandre. You'd better stop whatever you're doing. Look!" she said, indicating the post which was now glowing as brightly as a miniature sun. Flandre turned around but was instantly blinded by the intense beams. "Uugh!" She staggered backwards, blinking away sunspots and afterimages that danced across her retinas.

There was a loud crack of power and then the sign blacked out completely, no trace of its former brightness remaining, just like a light bulb blowing out. Cirno could sense no spiritual presence from within it at all.

"What was that?" exclaimed Flandre, rubbing her eyes.

"You overloaded the poor sign post and broke it," replied Cirno, looking up at the blackened, lifeless piece of wood. A soft double crack in the distance made both of them jump. Flandre spat on the grass, one red eye still firmly closed. Her body still tingled a little from the abrupt discharge of energy. She took another swig of blood from her bottle to lighten her mood. Lighten she thought. Ha.

"Urgh, lets get going, we know where to head now."

They walked down the path instead of flying for two reasons. One, Flandre didn't want to miss out on any landmarks or signs which were hard to pinpoint if you were zooming across the countryside and the second reason was that the trees themselves may shield the market from view if they were high enough in the night's sky.

"Stop, stop," said Cirno. "I have a stone in my shoe again."

"Urgh, not again. You'd think the stones were attracted to you or something."

Cirno took off her black little shoe and held it up high, the round stone clattering onto the paved road. Flandre could see her blue eye widen in shock through a hole near the tip of the footwear.

*You just noticed?*

"My shoes! My clothing! Everything has holes in it! When did this happen? Flandre, you gotta buy me some new cloths when we get to the market!"



"What? No way. I don't have that much money anyway without wasting it on you. I need some new clothing as well and I'm not wearing some flea ridden hand me down."

Cirno sneered at her, clearly not happy at all. She sat down in a huff and slipped back on her worn out shoe, making a big show of how displeased she was feeling. The ground around her started to frost over.

"If I don't get some new clothing I'll go home."

Flandre grimaced. Fairies demanding things? What would happen next? The moon falling down to earth? This was unbelievable!

*Damn it. I do kind of enjoy her company, for the time being at least. I've had enough of being alone down in the basement. And she at least has some kind of knowledge about the outside world. She knew about the signs, even if her sense of direction was somewhat lacking.*

She crossed her arms, her wings slumping downwards. *No way I'm wandering around out here alone.*

"Fineeeee," she moaned. "But I'm not splashing out. This is my money after all."

Cirno got up and started to jump around, flinging her arms in the air, giggling.

"Yay! New clothes! New clothes! Come on, let's get going. We don't want to miss it, let's go!"

She bounced and hopped around the place in a frenzy. Flandre had to dodge out of the way to avoid a collision.

"Hey, watch where you're going. Watch it!"

Back down the road they went, Cirno singing all the way about her new clothes. It served to drive Flandre crazy. She desperately

wanted to smack the hyperactive fairy over the head but they would be there soon so she turned her mind elsewhere.

*I wonder what they are doing back at the mansion?*

That clone better not give her away. Sometimes they acted too much like her for their own good.

A figure was walking down the road from the opposite end, obscured by the nightly gloom. Cirno stopped singing, even her carefree attitude contained some caution. As they came upon one another, Flandre could see that it was a man dressed in a heavy looking brown trench coat and what looked like a cowboy hat. Something long and narrow was covered in bandages on his back. A sword maybe or some kind of instrument?

"Hello little girls," he said in greeting, tipping his hat.

*Little girl? I'm almost 500 years old. I hate it when people assume I'm just some silly child.*

"Hello," grumbled Flandre.

"Hey, mister!" said Cirno.

The man scratched his chin stubble while chuckling lightly.

"Don't suppose either of you know where the bamboo forest dojo is, do you? Somehow all the magic signs in this area have shorted out. Can't believe my bad luck. I'm already running late as it is. Ah, damn it all."

Flandre shifted uncomfortably on her heels. Cirno looked up at her, opening her mouth to say something but Flandre flashed her a glare that said "You'd better not say anything." Cirno looked away, folding her arms in a sulk.

"Ah, that's a real shame all right," said Flandre, acting as if butter wouldn't melt. "I'm afraid I don't know where that place is. I'm not

from around here."

The man laughed again, shaking his head and started to walk past them.

"Well, that's a shame. Keep safe out here, little girls. The night can be a dangerous place."

*You definitely don't need to tell me that.*

When he had disappeared back into the darkness, Flandre pulled something out from her bag and displayed it in front of Cirno, a look of triumph etched on her face. Cirno keenly examined the item, easily excited at any kind of surprise. It was a square looking pouch, made of some cheap brown material. Flandre threw and caught the pouch repeatedly with one hand. Metallic objects clattered together with each juggle. Cirno pointed at it in amazement.

"T-that's his wallet! You stole his wallet!" she exclaimed.

Flandre shrugged, letting the pouch drop back in her hand before grasping it tightly and lifting it over her head like a trophy.

"Well he did say that it was a dangerous place after all."

"But what if he notices and comes back?"

"Listen Cirno. You want some nice new clothing right? With this, we can buy tons of cool stuff. Look, I'll even take the cash and drop the pouch here so he can take it back. There's some other junk in here that doesn't interest me."

She didn't mention that she didn't really have all that much money since sister didn't see all that much point in giving someone who never left the mansion pocket money.

Flandre took the random assortment of coins and placed them inside her bag for safe keeping and then proceeded to discarded the pouch, dropping it in the middle of the pathway. Cirno leaned down

and watched the pouch as the breeze blew it a few paces to the side, toying with it until it came to rest in the green grass. She looked up at Flandre, a pleading look on her features.

"Can I hold some money?"

Flandre shook her head.

"It would be safer with me. Besides," she added, smiling. "You don't have any pockets."

## Festive Spirits

"Amulets for sale" Genuine magical amulets for sale," called a guff sounding trader as he fought to make his declaration heard over the carpet of voices and sounds that filled the air over the market.

The nightly Gensokyo market was indeed an impressive spectacle to anyone who laid eyes upon it but such a vast gathering of beings was an even more extraordinary sight to Flandre who was only experienced with dealing with small numbers of Youkai, those often being fairies. There seemed to be an endless array of stalls, showrooms and tightly packed tables selling everything imaginable and many things that couldn't be imagined. It was still the dead of night but large lamps had been erected on tall black metal polls around the encampment, creating the illusion of daytime without the burning sunlight that all vampires hated.

Cirno and Flandre strode into the market, walking under a bright, vibrant banner tied to a couple of trees. Their eyes were wide with amazement as they tried to process every single remarkable thing they saw, one after the other. Flandre could smell expensive perfume which was quite similar to a variety that sister used. Her heart pounded anxiously for a few seconds until she angrily chastised herself for being so silly. This was a marketplace, after all.

As soon had the vampire taken a handful of steps then the familiar fragrance was rapidly overtaken by the mouthwatering scent of a roasting, flame grilled slab of meat somewhere else in the encampment. Flandre's stomach rumbled and Cirno's mouth hung open with a lustful moan. A lizard looking creature walking on two legs casually strolled past them while donning a full set of rusty, old armour.

There was also a hulking oni with large pointy horns plus a ghostly looking figure draped in a white cloak whose outline seemed to shimmer and shift in the lamp light. There was even a normal looking

human struggling to heft a rolled up carpet over one shoulder. So many different types of beings and all together in the same place!

The first table the two decided to take a closer look at was selling a selection of weapons and armour. Some were richly decorated, the kind not meant for casual use while others were well worn out old pieces of tat. Flandre sniffed the scent of old blood on some of the more rusty examples but other than that there was nothing that really interested her.

*I'm my own weapon. I don't need one of these silly toys to fight my battles for me. Besides, none of these can possibly match my beloved Lavateinn.*

Cirno had been entranced by a sliver dagger and had been glaring at it for some time now. She had just about worked up enough courage to snatch it off the table and impress Flandre by swinging it around when she noticed that the vampire had already moved on. Cirno, being as impulsive as ever, immediately forgot what she was doing and hurriedly followed after her companion before she disappeared into the constantly shifting crowd.

With her relatively modest height, Flandre had to shove and push her way out of the press of bodies crowding around the stalls to get to the next one. There were a few protests from the market goers but one menacing look from Flandre's deep red eyes was enough to persuade them that it would be in their best interests not to press the issue.

*So many people here, why are they all getting in my way? Have they no respect? I've not long since escaped that damn river so I'm not going to be swallowed up by this crowd of nameless peasants.*

She felt something tug at her dress.

"What's the big idea?" she snapped, turning angrily. It was just Cirno who was trying not to lose her in the tight press of bodies. She looked a little startled by her new found friend's outburst and

sheepishly let go, the tattered cloth of Flandre's once beautiful dress falling against the vampire's thigh. Flandre's expression softened a little and she grabbed Cirno's hand and led her through the mass of chatting shoppers until they found themselves out of the vice.

"I'm not used to this," said Flandre, still looking a bit agitated. She had seen some of the looks that she and Cirno had gotten due to their size and ragged clothes. She had seen pity, contempt but mostly complete indifference. It's not my fault, is it?

*Those judgemental fools!* I swear, the next person that-

"Not used to this, huh? I don't come here that often either," said Cirno, staring at her with her frosty blue eyes. "Fairies don't have much money after all which is why those crusty, old shopkeepers always look down on us." Cirno perked up a little and smiled at Flandre. "But this time I have a friend with money! Will you treat me to something nice?" Flandre frowned and patted her bag. It wasn't like she had that much money herself.

"Hey, you two," came a soft sounding voice from behind them. They both turned and came face to face with two long white bunny ears which were attached to the head of a purple haired Youkai in a black jacket. She was behind a large wooden stall with the banner above proudly reading 'Erin's miracle medicines and remedies' in small golden print. Reisen's eyes had a certain magical quality to them which caused Flandre to blink rapidly for a moment before she decided to look elsewhere.

"Hello, my name's Reisen and I'm selling some of the finest Lunarian mixtures, medicines and potions available on the mainland."

She indicated various bottles and glass containers with a wave of her hand. They came in all shapes and sizes, colours and textures. Reisen was smiling but Flandre detected a hint of desperation in her voice as she listed the names of her products and all the wonderful things that they could do. Cirno picked up a flask of sparkling blue liquid with a label that she either couldn't read or simply didn't bother

to. She sniffed it a little and smiled at the apparently pleasing scent before raising it to her lips.

Reisen frantically snatched the flask away from her. "No free samples, besides, that one isn't for drinking. Well, unless you purchase it." The bunny girl forced an awkward smile and laughed a false laugh. "Wait just a moment please, kind patrons."

Cirno and Flandre exchanged a glance while Reisen bent down behind the stall to get something.

She jumped up with a different flask in hand, her long bunny ears the first thing to protrude from beneath the stall. This one was green in colour and bubbled with fizzy spheres. "If you would like something to drink then how-" she began before noticing that her two would be customers had decided to move on.

"Hey, please come back! If I don't sell anything master will beat me. Wahhhhhhhh!" she pleaded, slumping on her stall table in defeat.

"That stall was full of boring stuff," remarked Cirno, kicking a can across the grassy ground. "Lets find something fun to spend our coins on!" Come on, lets head in that direction!" The ice fairy flickered her crystal clear wings and skipped around while pointing to an area filled with attractions and an excited crowd to match but Flandre wasn't listening. Something had caught her attention, a familiar and welcoming scent that sent goosebumps down her spine.

"This way Cirno, I think I've found found something fun."

They crossed the mass of people and non-people, some of which were dancing, drinking or singing or a combination of all three. One blue skinned demoness was laying in the road with a bottle of Gensokyo's finest clutched in her black nailed hand. Two human looking men were arguing about some kind of wager. They carefully walked around a Youkai with large black feathered wings who was



handing out magical flickering flyers detailing the menu of a noddle joint on the northern side of the market.

Flandre followed the heavenly aroma throughout the crowd, ignoring the many other distracting perfumes and odours. The scent seductively lured her deeper into the market like a bewitching sirens song.

*Such a lovely aroma, I must find out what it is.*

Her fangs extended themselves a little in anticipation. Cirno just merrily followed along, beaming with the promise of something fun.

*There it is!*

Flandre excitedly rushed up to the blood dealership which had an amusing novelty sign with wooden fangs hanging over it like a huge gaping mouth. The writing was styled just like dripping red blood though Flandre could tell that it was just paint. A big barrel chested man dressed in brown overalls was manning the store. He sat on a wooden stall that didn't look near as strong enough to support his impressive bulk. He was stroking his beard in anticipation. The shelves behind him contained crimson glasses filled with many different colours of blood. Dark red, ruby red, a kind of swirling scarlet that emitted a faint glow. It seemed they had everything a vampire might want.

Flandre was grinning like a kid in a candy store. So much to choose from and it was all here to be had! She leaned over the counter, trying to get a better look at the bloody collection, her mouth hanging open lustfully.

"Hey, what's that one?" she asked, pointing to a triangular shaped glass bottle on the top shelve that entranced her with it's unique scent.

"That's vermilion blend, a rather pungent mixture of demon blood. Quite expensive but worth it for the seasoned taster," answered a tall

pale man wrapped in a black cape before the shopkeeper had a chance to speak up. He was a vampire, that much was unmistakable. The way the shadows seemed to cling to him. His smell and those familiar red eyes that blessed her kind but the biggest clue above all else was that look of conceited arrogance that was so common with nightwalkers.

"Ah, thanks," said Flandre. "Shopkeeper, how much is a bottle of that stuff?"

"That here," he grunted, turning in his seat. "That'll be one hundred and forty for the whole bottle, no negotiating."

Flandre fished around gingerly in her bag, just on the chance that a huge sum of money had become lost down there but she already knew that she couldn't afford it. She let out a disappointed sigh. Still, she continued to rummage. *I'm not going to miss out on such a blood lunch!*

Cirno had followed eagerly before, motivated with the promise of fun but her enthusiasm had rapidly drained from her icy veins when she realized that fairy fun didn't necessarily equal vampire fun. She leaned behind Flandre while carefully avoiding the sharp, colourful tips of her wings.

"Hey, Flandre," she whispered. "Blood isn't fun for everyone you know. Gimme some coins. Come on." Frosty breath brushed up against the back of Flandre's neck, causing her to flinch at the cold touch. A cute little yelp escaped her lips. It felt like someone had dumped a large bag of ice cubes down her back.

The tall vampire looked on, smirking before he took another sip of his blood filled wine glass. Flandre wheeled around to face Cirno with a flustered look on her face. Cirno blinked and just stared at her in bewilderment.

"What do you think your doing Cirno!" Flandre snapped.

"Huh? Just want a few coins to buy something. I don't want to hang around a blood shop. Yuck! Besides, you said this would be fun and this is about as fun as catching a cold. What are you, silly?"

*Urgh. Can't I do anything without being bothered?*

Flandre rapidly fished out some money and slammed it down into Cirno's waiting palms while telling her to go off and buy herself a new outfit or whatever it was that fairies brought.

*Sheesh, I wonder if this is what Sakuya has to deal with on a daily basis?*

Cirno was too happy to pay any mind to the stinging sensation as the coins slapped against her hands and hopped across the ground into the market like a blue comet, almost colliding with several passers-by as she happily chanted "Money, money!" while manically swinging her hands above her head.

Flandre sighed inwardly and returned to scanning the blood racks for something delicious while within her price range. *Lets see.* She focused her eyes on the labels. Some of them were worn out but her picture perfect vision put them right in front of her.

*Common blend? No.*

*Human surprise? I can just get that for free from any human. Besides, I've had enough of that at the mansion. I want something I've never tried before. A treat for my night out. Ah, here we go. Dragon strength crimson.*

The price for a single glass wasn't too much but unfortunately she couldn't afford the whole bottle.

"Shopkeeper, give me a glass of that dragon crimson stuff."

He gave Flandre a wary look, his gaze traveling up and down her body, noticing the torn and muddy clothes while fumbling with his

thick beard. Flandre narrowed her eyes. *What was this buffoon waiting for?* The shopkeeper tapped the counter heavily with one pudgy finger.

"Ya gotta have money little lady if you want some of this here good stuff."

*Money? Of course I have money.*

Flandre snatched the right amount out of her purse and angrily slammed it down on the counter. One of the coins spun on the worn, wooden surface before clattering down to a standstill.

"Here's your money. What? Didn't think I had any? As I said, one helping of Dragon crimson."

Flandre glared at the shopkeeper even as he grumbled and grudgingly turned around to comply with her order. His hairy hand reached up onto the shelf as he stooped to grab the bottle which was resting atop the top shelf. It was surrounded by its glass brothers and sisters.

"My, my," said the tall vampire. "Aren't we in a frightful mood tonight."

Flandre pulled up a stall and sat down, brushing off the back of her red dress before she did so. The promise of tasty blood always made her feel a little light headed and if she was somehow kept waiting for too long, irritable.

"Don't keep a vampire from its blood," Flandre replied bluntly. The vampire smiled at that. He was tall and so didn't need a stall to sit upon. He took another sip from his wine glass.

"Quite. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Oswald Vargach. I haven't seen many other vampires around this area. Only a few can be found this far out into the forest. We usually live nearer the human settlements for obvious reasons. I know the few individuals

that live around here by name but I can't say that I know you, young lady."

"No, I don't suppose you would," replied Flandre. "I'm just travelling around. Having some fun for once, that's all."

The shopkeeper turned around with a dull glass in his hand full of a thick, heavy red substance and placed it carefully upon the table. It smelled of strawberries mixed with oxygen rich blood. Flandre took the glass in her delicate looking fingers, savouring the scent. Her red eyes were transfixed on the little crimson red ocean swishing around in her hand.

"Ah, how quaint. It seems you have indeed been on an adventure. You're clothes are positively frayed from your body like someone took the whip to you."

Flandre raised the glass to her lips and drank down half the contents in one go. Her throat bobbed up and down as the nourishing liquid emptied itself right down her gullet. It was sticky and clung to her insides but was incredibly potent and felt like an instant blood rush to the head. She banged the glass on the table and gave out a refreshed breath.

*Ah, that's the stuff. Much richer than human blood. A bit tangy but that's fine. I wonder where they get this? Humph, wasn't that vampire saying something earlier?*

"You were saying someth-" BURP!

A massive and loud belch blew itself out from Flandre's mouth followed shortly by a series of small hiccups. Her cheeks rapidly turned a deep shade of red in embarrassment.

*I can't believe I just did that. Sister would scold me if I did such a thing at dinner.*

A sudden muggy haze filled her mind and red blurry spots began to appear in her vision. Her head began to role around on her shoulders like it had a life of its own and was in danger of falling off.

"Urghhhhhh," she moaned as her forehead began to sweat profusely. It felt like an entire marching band was performing right inside her skull while also kicking it along the way for good measure.

Flandre's head suddenly felt extremely heavy and fell down onto her waiting arms on the table. Only her blond hair could be seen sticking out from under her hat, masking her face from view. Oswald watched the transformation with a mixture of amusement and surprise.

"Don't tell me you've become drunk after just half a glass? Haven't you had anything other than human blood before?"

Flandre ran her nails across the wooden tabletop, digging into the bark with her extended nails.

"D-don't look down on m-me. Mind your own business," she slurred out before hiccuping again. Stupid drink. What's with that horrible throbbing?

She clutched her forehead tighter. *Ah, damn it. This feels ten times worse then when I raid the mansion's kitchen and binge eat too much ice cream.*

Her forehead was throbbing like someone was gleefully hitting it with a giant sledgehammer. She lazily tried to grasp the glass again but the shopkeeper plucked it up before she could lay her hands on it.

"I think you've had enough young lady."

"Yes," Oswald agreed. "You clearly cannot handle your blood, young lady. Stop this unsightly behaviour immediately."

"Mind y-your own businesssss, Oswald. I don't-," she began to say before losing her train of thought.

Flandre looked up aimlessly at the sky, spacing out. Ah, so pretty. All the stars are dancing in the sky just for me!

"Buzz off," she finished when her attention returned back from the heavens to matters down on the ground. Oswald didn't like that one bit and turned all stuffy, standing up straight with his arms crossed as he stared daggers at Flandre. He frowned.

"Don't talk to one of your elders like that. I've been alive for three hundred and eighty two years so I deserve to be addressed with a little respect."

Flandre burst out laughing at this admission, banging her fist against the table. She jumped off her stool but landing awkwardly and stumbled a little. The crowd continued to mingle around them, not taking much notice of yet another drunken Youkai in a festival filled with .

"I'm o-older than that. Close to five hundred years despite my youthful beauty, s-so I can understand your confusion." She pointed an accusing finger at an increasingly irritated Oswald.

"Maybe you should run along before your mother notices you're ditching school."

It was at that time that Cirno came running back while brandishing a bright green ice cream cone in one hand. Splotches of which decorated her lips at random. Icy cream on an icy mouth. She was still munching down a mouthful when she reached her companion.

"What's going on Flandre? Look, I got some ice cream here. I got one for you too. Isn't this place great?"

Flandre flipped and flopped around like she was made of elastic but finally managed to face her friend as she attempted to place that high pitched voice. That fairy seems pretty familiar. Does she work at the mansion? She hiccuped again, straightening her hat which had been teetering on the edge of her head. Oswald walked behind her

and placed a hand firmly on her back. The shopkeeper started to complain about not starting up a fight near his establishment.

"Listen here, you-"

Flandre flinched at his cold fingers brushed up against her and spun around, hammering him in the chest with her fist with the force of a thunderclap. He just had a second to register a look of surprise before he flew backwards, his black cape flapping in the wind before colliding with a fruit stall on the opposite side to the blood vendor. Some Youkai yelped as they clumsily dodged out of his path. Oswald disappeared under the avalanche of carrots, cucumbers and onions and a few more varieties only found in Gensokyo.

"Don't touch me, pervert," Flandre snapped.

"Hey, Flandre. What's wrong with you? Why'd you hit that guy?" asked a partly concerned and confused Cirno. Flandre just indicated the vampires rapid trajectory with a swish of her hand.

"He was annoying. Shouldn't... shouldn't sneak up on someone like that. It was an accident, honest."

The crowd was beginning to murmur and gossip about the events that had just unfolded. Cirno noticed that the word 'Officer' was being thrown around which meant bad news to her. She'd had plenty of experience with those annoying killjoys considering how much trouble she regularly got into.

"Come on, we need to get out of here." Cirno extended her hand, beckoning Flandre to follow her. Flandre looked at the fairy's hand groggily, like it was some kind of mysterious puzzle that demanded to be studied. She was about to speak when Cirno grabbed her by the hand and started to lead her through the masses. They parted before her, obviously not wanting to share Oswald's misfortune.

"Where are you taking me," Flandre whined, offering only token resistance as she was lead away from the scene of the crime. They



passed down the main pathway in between two rows of stalls, through an open market area selling food produce and past a band of angels performing soothing light music on their sparkling, golden harps.

The drunk audience in attendance was complaining and booing that they wanted something livelier. Someone tried to had Cirno a flyer but she slapped it away from her, much to his annoyance. Flandre hiccuped again while struggling a little and moaning incoherently.

"Cirno, where are we going! You're hands are too cold!"

"You caused a ruckus back there. They were going to call the officers and get us thrown out like they always do."

"Ha, I-let them come. I'll just blast them into smithereens."

Finally they came to a stop in a less crowded part of the market filled with antiques, books and rows of old, dusty furniture. There was a maze of tables that was lit overhead by burning lamps that cast a melancholy light on the bustling Youkai below. Someone who looked very much like the stereotypical image of a wizard complete with long beard was thumbing through a dull looking book while another man haggled over a steel fireplace shaped in the likeness of a dragons head.

Flandre wasn't happy being dragged around and yanked her hand back like Cirno had contracted some kind of plague. She was pouting, her cheeks a rosy shade of red. Cirno looked at her curiously as the ice loli in her hand began to drip down her arm.

"I cannot believe it. You're drunk, Flandre. How'd you manage to get drunk?"

"Don't accuse me, fairy. I just had a little crimson dragon blend stuff, that's all. Sheesh, don't act like stuffy Sakuya."

"Well, don't worry, Flandre. I'll help you out with this. Here ya go," said Cirno as she shoved the ice loli right into Flandre's open mouth, mid-sentence. "I brought this one for you and a good thing as well. It will help cool off your head a little."

The icy coldness rapidly turned the inside of Flandre's mouth into the deep, inhospitable Arctic. Her sharp fangs dug into the top, sending freezing signals of pain into her sensitive pink gums. "Yahooohhhh!" she cried, coughing the icy pop out of her mouth. Her hat fell onto the floor as she grabbed her forehead to help stem off one of the biggest cases of brain freeze she had ever felt.

"Ahhhh, you wasted it," Cirno said as she crouched down to lament the fallen ice cream. She looked at it thoughtfully and licked her lips. "Maybe its not too dirty yet!"

Flandre groaned and smacked the back of Cirno's head, right in the blue bow fastened on her equally blue hair. The little fairy gave a short yelp and looked up with a forlorn look on her face.

"Why'd you do that for?"

"Why did you shove a ice loli in my mouth?" Flandre countered. "Are you stupid or something?"

Cirno rubbed the back of her head, genuinely wondering what she had done to deserve such treatment. She sniffled, looking a little upset.

"I'm not stupid! You got yourself drunk, so I was just trying to help you. Well, it worked didn't it?"

Flandre paused for a moment to consider those words. She did remember drinking that extremely rich blood wine that made her incredibly light headed and dizzy. Then something about hitting that pestering, perverted vampire with the cloak. Cirno turned on her small heels and started to walk away in a strop, her pale wings fluttering ill-temperedly. "I'm leaving. I'm not sticking around to be hit

again. Don't think you can treat Fairies however you want. We deserve more respect."

Flandre frowned and stared at Cirno's back as she started to walk away. She tutted and folded her arms, acting the proud vampire as well as her elegant sister.

*What did she expect, shoving that thing into my mouth? A little smack is less than the mansion workers would get if they did something like that to me. Fairies are far too sensitive. Still, she did help me back there and she's the only real friend I've made outside the mansion.*

"H-hey," she said softly. Then when it became apparent that Cirno hadn't heard her she was forced to speak up. Her cheeks were a little red from the embarrassment of what she was about to say. Flandre opened her mouth but hesitated, fumbling on her words. Cirno continued on her merry way.

*No, don't go! I've had enough of being alone!*

"Cirno!" Flandre called out. Cirno stopped licking the ice cream down her arm and tilted her head back to glance at Flandre, frowning.

"What?"

"Don't leave me alone. I'm... sorry."

Cirno blinked. "Huh?"

"I'm sorry for hitting you ok? Sheesh. Just don't shove-" she began before she realized she was about to chastise the fairy again.

"Anyway, come back here and we can spend some more money. I still have quite a bit left over. If you leave now, I won't be able to treat you."

Cirno immediately lightened up at the promise of more money and everything that involved. She stopped to consider, for a whole three

seconds and turned back to face Flandre who at this very moment, was her best friend in the whole wide world.

"Well, I'll stick around for a little longer. Can we get some more ice cream? I'm all out."

"In a moment. I still need to get myself some new clothes. We can spend what is left but I'm not buying some old tat because I didn't leave myself enough money."

Cirno tugged at her dress which was still the same dirty, torn blue piece she'd worn the whole day and night.

*We hadn't she changed into her new outfit yet?*

"Umm," Cirno began as she looked at the floor. "I didn't get a new outfit. I was on the way looking for it, I swear, but I heard this ice cream seller."

She scratched her blue hair nervously. "Before I knew it, I spent all my coins on ice cream. But I did buy one for you as well so don't be mad!"

Flandre groaned, her headache threatening to rear its ugly head again. She sighed and fought down the temptation to shout at the irresponsible Cirno and call her stupid.

*How could I have trusted her with money in the first place?*

Flandre forced herself to calm down. Think happy thoughts. She settled for just a simple face-palm. I can't believe this.

An awkward "Oh" was all she managed in response. Then she saw a flash of purple hair that turned her stomach to jelly. Flandre sprung into action and lunged forwards before jumping under a nearby cloth covered table. Cirno blinked because suddenly there was no more vampire to be seen. She wondered if the sun had abruptly decided to come up.

*Patchouli Knowledge, the stuffy, asthmatic bookworm that always told her off was here! Why was she here? Had she been sent to retrieve me? Had I been seen?*

Sweat started to appear on her face. She felt like a cornered animal, panicked and afraid. Flandre pieced together the brief glimpse she had captured within her memory. She had seen Patchouli standing by a stall full of old cardboard boxes. In her pale fingers was a book which she had been thumbing through intently.

Patchouli didn't seem alarmed at all. Perhaps she is only out shopping? That's about the only thing that could possibly motivated her to lose out on her valuable reading time. Koakuma must be hanging around her master as well.

Cirno popped under the table next to Flandre, almost making her pumping heart leap right out of her chest. "What are you doing under here? The isn't up. I just checked," said Cirno. The temperature under the table plummeted as the ice fairy snuggled her small form inside while tucking her pointy wings under the cloth but Flandre didn't even notice. This situation was red hot!

"Keep your voice down," she hissed. "There's an annoying person up there, that's all. I don't want that tattle tail to see me."

Cirno grinned and rubbed her chin knowingly like some master detective. "So, you're not supposed to be here, huh. Looks like someone's gonna get busted. Maybe I should turn you in before you cause anymore trouble."

"You'd better not unless you have a death wish, now be quite," Flandre hissed as the footsteps came ever closer. Then she heard a familiar voice that filled her with dread.

"Come along, Koakuma," said Patchouli as the reclusive mage readjusting her glasses. She was still engrossed in the very same book that she had been holding before. Her long stripy robe flowed

around her ankles as she hovered close to the ground. "This tome is quite a rare find in such a dreary place."

"Lady Patchouli, this backpack is heavy," whined the little devil who was hauling an impressive collection of books in a bag slung across her back. So packed was it that dusty novels and old scrolls were sticking out of the top. "Can we not carry them with magic, Lady Patchouli?"

"Don't be silly. I'll not risk another curse or trap ruining this batch. We need to rescue these valuable books, not destroy them. No, they need to be carried all the way back to the mansion so that they can be properly examined."

"Awwwww," groaned Koakuma, slumping under the weight. Flandre could see their feet as they passed. She just hoped Cirno would keep her mouth shut. She placed a finger against her mouth when that very same fairy started to fidget like something was tickling her under her worn out dress. Cirno started to yawn, but Flandre clamped a hand solidly around her mouth.

Cirno mumbled through Flandre's fingers, her frosty breath stinging her delicate skin but the vampire's grasp remained firm. They waited under the table for about a minute but heard nothing else besides the background noise of the market and random people speaking and haggling. That, and Cirno's constant mumbling.

Her face had turned even lighter than usual if such a thing was even possible and her struggling became more frantic and urgent. Flandre judged that enough time had passed and allowed herself a sigh of relief. She released Cirno who rapidly took in a deep, big breath as if she had just discovered how to use her lungs. Cirno's little heart was beating hard again her chest.

"Y-you almost k-killed me," she spurted out in between taking in large lungfuls of air.

"Don't be silly. Fairies are tougher than that."

"C-can we get up now, my neck is started to get stiff," whispered Cirno.

"Fine. This way, but be quite."

*Of all the luck, Patchouli had to be here this very same night. What if sister was here as well?*

The night was the vampires playground after all. Flandre crept out from under the cloth, listening intently for a moment before standing up and giving the all clear. Cirno followed shortly after, banging her head on the table before exiting, much to the amusement of Flandre.

They moved out of the antique district and hunted around for a good clothing shop while Flandre made sure to curtail any temptations her fairy companion may have for their remaining spending money. Still, that didn't stop Cirno trying to convince her benefactor to buy her another treat along the way.

They found a suitable place selling a wide selection of garments and dresses after taking a turn into a narrow alleyway of stalls. Loud music with beating drums could be heard further down the street near the end and a strange intoxicating substance filled Flandre's nostrils, which someone was puffing out from a smoking pipe.

Drewmant leaf, a cheap, not so addicting drug that made you hallucinate. She'd caught Hong Meiling smocking some on the job one time when she had been hiding along the mansion wall, sneaking about. If Sakuya had caught wind of this...

Flandre looked through the many wares that the shop offered but tutted at the poor selection.

*Something red would be nice, after all, it is my colour.*

The shop was a old shack cobbled together from old planks of wood that boasted no walls or doors of any description so that Youkai could just walk in or view the clothing as they passed. Other

customers mingled with each other, each looking for the best deal. The more expensive items were hung up against the shop wall with hefty price tags attached to them but there were also bargain bins full of used and second hand clothing. One Youkai with two goatlike horns was struggling to pull a top over her head and getting quite frustrated when it became impaled on said horns.

"Look at that stunning ball gown," said a starry eyes Cirno, gazing longingly at a richly embroidered silky smooth, sky blue dress mounted on a dress stand. "Can I have that one?"

Flandre shook her head and pointed to the bargain bins out front. "You can pick something from those because you spent all your money on ice cream."

"No fair," complained Cirno but one look at an unsympathetic Flandre made her certain that she wouldn't get her way. Still, the promise of a new outfit was enough to keep her happy and she cheerfully rummaged through the boxes as if looking for some buried treasure.

Flandre flicked her hand through a selection of garments on a dress-rail, carefully feeling the texture of each item with her fingers.

*I can't wear something that isn't as soft as my own beautiful, white skin. This one perhaps? No, too gaudy for my tastes. And this one? It wouldn't even be fit for a human servant, let alone myself.*

They met up outside the shop when they had both made up their minds. Cirno had selected a plain blue dress decorated with a few pale white lines, much like her old one minus the holes and tears. Flandre on the other hand had bought a striking scarlet red designer dress made from the finest angel cloth which came down to her knees and had roses embroidered in black silk thread on its front.

"How do I look?" Flandre asked, giving her best picture perfect smile and adorable pose for Cirno to judge.



"Looking good Flandre. I just wish I could have something as nice as that?" she said, brushing down her own new dress, looking a little crestfallen. Flandre walked up behind her and placed her arm warmly around her shoulder and started to lead her back down the market.

"Ah, cheer up Cirno. Look, I still have some coins left. Lets go buy some more ice cream or something."

Cirno smiled cheerfully at that and her sweet enthusiasm was infectious as Flandre found herself smiling widely in kind. They both went off to track down some more icy treasure.

# Snowfall

"So, what are those shiny things on your back? Wings?" asked Cirno as she stuffed the last ice cream lolly into her gaping mouth.

Flandre flexed her multicoloured crystal wings, conscious that someone was talking about her appearance.

"Of course they are, what else would they be? Why? Don't you like them?"

Cirno kicked a stone on the dusty path they were travelling along which skipped off the road and vanished from view somewhere into the night. A large birdlike creature few overhead, flapping its giant wings and screeching annoyingly.

"Oh I like them. I like all the bright colours. Reds and blues and greens. Just wondering, that's all."

Cirno moved over to touch one of the dangling jewels which danced in a bewitching way, like it was inviting the ice fairy to steal it away for herself. Go on, Flandre won't mind was the message that flashed through Cirno's mind. She reached her hand out, starry eyed, but the jewel jingled back out of range.

"What do you think you're doing?" snapped an outraged Flandre, backing up a few steps. "My wings are delicate. I didn't give you permission to touch them."

"Ahhhh, come on," pleaded Cirno, her little hands grabbing air like she was about to pounce at any moment. Flandre turned her nose up and shook her head. Cirno looked down at her shoes forlornly, clearly disappointed.

They had left the marketplace in high spirits, new outfits and with quite a lot of ice cream in their possession which they had proceeded to shovel down their mouths at an impressive rate.

Flandre had some rather bad brain freezes and whenever she saw the plucky Cirno enjoy multiple ice lollies without any ill effects, she couldn't help but feel a little envious.

Something rustled in the bushes up ahead. A low growl emanating from somewhere inside the green hedge. Flandre raised her eyebrows in boredom. Not another roaming spirit predator. It had been exciting the first time one of those things had sprung out from the shadows to attack them but Flandre soon realized that they were just mindless hunters who preyed on the weak and unwary. Without danger there was no excitement to be had at all.

"Another spirit creature?" asked Cirno.

"Yeah. Do you want this one? I'm bored with them."

"Sure."

As soon as they strode into range the creature leapt out of the bushes, roaring in an unnaturally shifting tone. This one took the form of a pitch black puma with shimmering purple shapes moving across its body. Cirno grinned and a crackling tree of ice formed on the earth in front of her, growing as tall as the old trees around them.

The predator's course lead it straight into the ice where it became tangled and trapped. The ice rapidly grew around it until it became totally engulfed. Its snarling face was twisted in rage as it snapped at Cirno, perfectly frozen in place inside its own ice prison.

"So where are we going this time? There must be something else going on tonight, right?" asked Flandre, totally ignoring the recent inconvenience.

Cirno pondered the question for a moment but not before gloating over her victory and tapping at the ice.

"Well, there is still the oni bar but that's a pretty rough place. I don't really like going there. Full of brutish, dumb oni always starting fights.

Other than that, hmmm lets see. There's the nightly market that, oh wait, we've already been there."

The moon was still out in full force and glared down at them from above. Two little girls walking alone an old dusty path in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by an ancient forest of trees that stretched for as far as you could see.

Flandre hoped that they didn't get lost again after what happened last time. It was starting to get colder as well, a far cry from the comfort of the fire heated market place. Once again, Cirno didn't seem to notice the change in temperature and carried on her merry way without a care in the world.

*Oh, why can't I be like that? Still, I bet she doesn't do so well in the summer. Maybe she'd melt like a snowman if I lit a fire under her dress.*

That thought caused her to giggle a little.

"Hey, what are you laughing about?" asked Cirno. "I'm trying to explain something here."

"Oh, just something that happened. Please, continue."

"Well, all right then. There's the lake near the mansion. You can freeze frogs for fun like I do whenever I'm bored."

Flandre rolled her eyes. That wasn't the first time she had suggested that. This fairy really seemed to enjoyed freezing things. Anything. The scarlet vampire was starting to get frustrated at all these foolish suggestions.

"That's a stupid idea. I want something fun like the market! If I wanted to look at frozen wildlife, I'd just open up the nearest freezer."

"Hey, don't knock it until you've tried it. I'd bet you'd have great fun. Give it a chance."

Flandre turned her nose up like a spoiled princess. "Not interested."

Cirno thrust both her arms downwards in a huff. "Well fine if you don't like it. I don't like drinking disgusting sticky blood but you don't see me complaining about it!"

Flandre smiled that cruel smile she sometimes displayed as she reached into her bag and pulled out her beloved bottle of blood which shone slightly in the moonlight. Cirno looked at the bottle nervously, uncertain of her vampiric friend's intentions. Flandre leered over her and thrust the bottle at her face like a fencing sword which causing Cirno to shriek.

"I don't mind if you have a taste, little fairy," said Flandre in a mocking tone. "Come on, its high in energy."

The bottle loomed over Cirno, the crimson blood inside sloshing around in its glass container as Flandre prodded it at her. The little ice fairy clamped her hands firmly over her mouth while mumbling through them to get that yucky bottle away from her. It only made Flandre want to tease her more and she grinned at the thought of her hapless companion begging for mercy but the sight of fresh blood proved too big a temptation.

"Fine. More for me," she said before carefully unsealing the top.

*Hmm, less than half full. With all the trouble, I forgot to refill it at the shop. I suppose I could always hunt down some more the old fashioned way but I'm out of practice. Sakuya has had all of my meals prepared for so long that I've forgotten what it means to be a true vampire. Well, if they would just let me outside then I wouldn't need to be treated like a child!*

If Flandre had been more honest with herself, then she would have admitted that another reason was that she always seemed to be a little too enthusiastic which usually resulted in her making a mess of things.

Before she could bring the succulent liquid to her waiting lips, a bright flash caught Flandre's attention. It came from her blind side; a line of trees on the side of the path. She looked around in time to see a swirling ball of shining yellow energy pulsing forwards with her firmly set as its target.

"Whoa, what the hell?" she said, hastily raising her hand in defense. Cirno saw what was coming and ducked for cover. The blast slammed into Flandre's hand, pushing her feet back with the force of impact. Her shoes dug deep furrows into the earth. The volatile mass of yellow vibrated and thrashed violently in her palm like it had a mind of its own. It stung like a constant bee sting but wasn't powerful enough to cause her any real harm. She winced at the pain and concentrated her will, dispelling the energy ball which fizzled out and died like a spent firework.

Belmorn emerged from between the tall trees, his wooden staff in hand which still glowed faintly from its recent use. "It took me a long while to find you, little girl."

He walked forwards imposingly, his black robes trailing behind him but not touching the dirty ground. Some unknown force held it just above the earth.

"I'll make you pay for my inconvenience," he rasped which he punctuated by banging his staff on the ground. A small tremor passed under the vampires feet but she didn't let it sway her even an inch. Leaves fell from the canopy above, fluttering down and twisting in the cold winds.

Flandre flexed her hand and cracked her knuckles with a sharp click. It still hurt but not all that much. Her deep red eyes fixed the ageing wizard with a dark, murderous stare. She snarled, her fangs extending themselves, ready for violence. She took a deep breath, her outrage at the surprise attack shimmering hotly just under the surface.

"Belmart is it? I hope that pathetic attack of yours was just a warm up."

"My name is Belmorn, vampire. And no, I can do much better than that. Count yourself lucky that you still hold the sunstone otherwise you'd be nothing more than vapour right now."

"Oh, that thing. That's what you want? I forgot I even had it. Hey, Cirno."

She tossed her bag to the ice fairy, who caught it clumsily, not expecting it.

"Wait over there, Cirno," said Flandre, indicating a sharp incline behind a few patches of thorny brambles with an outstretched finger.

Cirno glanced over, following Flandre's finger and then looked back.

"But I want to fight as well," she moaned, acting like she was being left out somehow.

"No need to leave fairy," sneered Belmorn. "It will be quicker if I deal with you together."

"Just go Cirno," snapped Flandre. "I'll deal with him alone so wait over there until I'm done."

Cirno grumbled to herself and, clutching the bag tightly to her chest, rose above the ground and flew off, her icy wings whisking her away until she vanished from sight down the incline.

*It's better that I fight alone as I don't want to worry about hurting someone I'm not supposed to hurt when I get caught up in the moment. Besides, I was looking for some excitement and here it is. I'm not sharing it.*

Belmorn watched the fairy until she disappeared from his sight and then turned his attention back to Flandre, tapping his staff lightly on the earth.

"You should have let your friend stay. Maybe you would last longer with her help. Then again," he laughed, stroking his chin. "Maybe not."

"You're so full of yourself, aren't you? I really enjoy bringing people like you down to earth. So, how do you want to play? Danmaku?"

Something must have amused Belmorn because he sneered at Flandre, laughing in his throaty tone. "Don't misunderstand brat. This isn't some game. You've caused me a great deal of trouble this night. After I kill you, perhaps I'll amuse myself with your plaything over there and retrieve the sunstone from her bloody corpse."

So that's how he wants to play, huh? No danmaku? Fine with me. I haven't killed anyone since me and sister came to this land, isolated as I was inside the mansion but this guy is practically begging for it. It will be nice to play with someone disposable for a change. I hope he doesn't break too quickly.

Belmorn raised his staff to attack, the leaves on the earth around him scattered like birds in the face of this magical build up. As quickly as lightening, Flandre blasted the forest floor in front of Belmorn which kicked up a mountain of dirt and mist which blocked the vampire from his view. He coughed as he breathed in some of the vile particles but didn't lose his focus. "I can still sense you, vampire!"

Something from the darkness grabbed onto his staff. White fingers with long talons dug into the old wood which splintered until the intense pressure. The grip was strong. He grunted with a physical effort ill suited to his withered frame as he tried to wrench his staff away from Flandre but she held on easily.

"It doesn't matter if you can sense me if you're too slow to react," she mocked, closing her grasp and shattering the staff into a million wooden fragments. Belmorn staggered backwards, off balance. Flandre helped him on his way with a light punch in the stomach. She made sure to hold herself back, lest she ruin her fun too early.



Belmorn cried out loudly as the strike knocked the wind from his lungs and flung him through the air like a bullet covered in flowing, black cloth. He landed roughly, rolling in the muddy earth until he collided with an overgrown hedge. "Damn brat," he snarled, pushing his bruised body back to its feet. He spat out some blood and formed a complex series of patterns with his fingers while holding his palm ready like a cocked gun.

"This is even easier than I thought it would be," came a sinister voice from the darkness. Belmorn spun on his heels, following the source. Glowing blue and red ruins appeared in the air near his hand etched with intricate writings. The top of a dark tree exploded into brilliant bright orange fireworks, the burning canopy throwing out blazing leaves like blistering rain.

"Wrong guess," mocked Flandre, who had appeared behind him with out so much as a gust of wind giving her away. One hand swept in, her sharp talons crashing through the wizard's shimmering barrier which broke immediately like crystal glass. Fragments fell away and disappeared as the spell was undone.

It did rebound her hand, pushing it back with a sharp, loud crack but Flandre's other was ready and plunged it into his back, blood spraying out on her maniacally grinning face. The ageing wizard screamed in pain but Flandre wasn't finished just yet. Her touch held an additional surprise as it discharged an immense amount of flickering energy into his back, creating a miniature sun on her fingertips which was promptly detonated, blowing Belmorn apart in a shower of super heated cloth and body parts.

Flandre licked at the few spatters of blood that reached her face, a simple light shield keeping her beautiful red dress safe from the whirlwind of gore. She grinned in triumph, happy with her performance even though it had been pathetically easy for her.

In truth, she hadn't intended for that simple attack to kill the wizard outright and was disappointed that her fun had come to such an abrupt end. Stupid old man she thought, looking at the smouldering

crater with contempt. Burning pieces of black robe littered the hole in the earth which was all that remained of the wizard Belmorn.

Flandre thought it was a fitting end considering that Belmorn had turned someone into a crater himself when they had first met.

*What goes around. comes around.*

The younger scarlet sister rubbed her stinging hands together and flew off to meet up with her fairy travelling companion.

*I'm glad Cirno didn't have to witness this sideshow of a battle. I'd hate it if she became scared of me or judged me harshly for doing that but it was something that had to be done. And if I happen to have some fun along the way, then what's the problem? I don't want to see Cirno stare at me like I'm some kind of monster. I've seen that kind of look on a few of the maids faces sometimes. That accusing look, that maddening accusing look of theirs.*

Her teeth ground together in bitter resentment. That was why she enjoyed playing pranks on the maids, well, one of the reasons at least.

"Hey, Flandre," Cirno called, waving her snow white hand enthusiastically at her friend's return. Seeing the fairy's welcoming expression washed away any inner demons that had been tormenting her and Flandre smiled back, landing on the grass and brushing off her dress.

"So how did it go?" asked Cirno, looking back in the direction of the battle. Black smoke was billowing up above the tree line. "I heard some loud bangs and was wondering what was going on."

"I took care of it. Old Merlin won't be bothering us again."

"Merlin?"

Flandre shrugged. "Don't worry about it." *I guess Cirno doesn't read enough books to get the reference.* Flandre frowned. *Why is she staring at me?*

"You have some red splotches on your face," Cirno said, pointing an inquisitive finger at her.

Flandre rubbed her face with the arm of her sleeve. "Lets get going," she mumbled from beneath the red cloth. "Don't worry, I'll tell you about my stunning victory along the way."

*Just without a few of the finer details.*

And so they resumed their travels down the dusty pathway without any further interruptions. They didn't really have any idea where it was leading them but Flandre reasoned that they would come to something eventually and besides, exploring the outside world was one of the objectives of this little trip of hers. Cirno didn't really care where they went as long as interesting things kept happening to her and around Flandre that seemed to be a regular occurrence.

The twisting pathway became harder to follow the further on they went. Each twist and turn along the well worn passage seemed to sap the life out of it. It became more worn out and grown over, becoming less recognizable as a result. Soon the forest claimed it completely, swallowing it up with green patches of vegetation. It was colder here, the temperature dropping to winter levels with glittering frost forming on the branches. The earth also had a light coating of snow covering it; A white carpet that crunched underfoot. Flandre could see her breath forming in the air as a chilly white cloud. She shivered, tugging her hat against her head.

"What's wrong?" asked Cirno as she frolicked happily in the snow. She was carving out shapes on the cold ground as she went, her blue dress swirling around her legs like water. "The weather's so great, don't you think? Nice and chilly."

Flandre rubbed her hands together, looking on the floor for something. *Ah, there we go.* She picked up a ice covered branch from under a mass of overgrown grass and set it alight by lightly tapping on the tip. The warm glow illuminated her red cheeked face which was clearly enjoying the fiery heat. The branch crackled as it burnt, the flame flickering in the cold wind. Cirno held out her arms, letting the small blizzard wash over her.

"Ah, so refreshing," she cooed.

Flandre tried her best to ignore the jubilant fairy and the frosty chill that felt like icy daggers stabbing her poor body. It was bad enough without having to listen to Cirno enjoying it so much. Now, every footstep she took left an imprint in the snowy floor, making it more of an effort to simply walk. Ah screw it, she thought. Her wings lit up and fanned out and she hovered above the unwelcoming ground, letting magic carry her with its invisible forces.

She hovered over a waist high hedge, trying to take the lead to put a little distance between them. There was a series of trees up ahead in the gloomy night which were almost completely white and heavy with snowfall. They resembled giant snow cones to her but there was something else that caught her watchful eye.

A figure was crouched behind one of the green white trees. It was hard for Flandre to pinpoint it's outline. The strangers clothing was pitch black but that shouldn't have been a problem for her excellent night vision. No, the shadows seemed to cling and flow around her, masking her from view but Flandre could just about make out the shifting shape if she concentrated hard enough.

"Hey Flandre, where'd you go?" called Cirno. Nice going, fairy, thought Flandre. The figure shot up, startled, the mask of darkness surrounding her fading, allowing the first unhindered look at her. She was quite tall, with a full figure and fuzzy red hair tied in two matching ponytails behind her head which were wrapped at the ends with light blue ribbons. Her clothing was pitch black, some kind of form fitting leather substance. On her back was a rugged brown

rucksack. Her light yellow eyes locked onto Flandre, her gaze hiding a controlled intensity.

"Who goes there?" she snapped, poising her body in a fighting stance. Her voice was harsh, not ladylike at all.

"Just me. My name is Flandre."

The lady didn't relax one bit and eyed Flandre with suspiciously, accessing whether she was a threat or not.

*Funny, because I'm doing the exact same thing. I wonder what she was looking at earlier before she was interrupted?*

"I don't know those names," said the stranger. "Well, what are you doing sneaking up on me? Do you work for Sevar?"

Flandre shrugged. "Who's Sevar? Should I somehow know that name? I'm just passing through, that's all."

It was at that point that Cirno came bursting through the tree canopy above, dislodging copious amounts of white flurry which rained down like it really was still snowing. Flandre pointed a thumb back at the fairy's grand entrance.

"That's my friend, Cirno."

Cirno landed on the ground roughly, stumbling along until she regained her footing. Some snow collected on top of Flandre's hat which she brushed off briskly.

"There you are," said the fairy, smiling now that she had found her elusive companion. Her eyes moved from Flandre to the mysterious lady in black.

"Who's that?" she asked Flandre.

"Claudette," replied the figure. "That's my name. Now, you two wouldn't happen to be bounty hunters, would you? Please, don't lie

to me. I'll know."

Cirno and Flandre looked at each other skeptically before they both shook their heads in unison. Snow had started to fall from the heavens and the wind was growing ever stronger and more bitter with every passing second. Flandre was wondering if it was still the product of Cirno's entrance but no, it really was starting to snow. The branch in Flandre's hand lost its flame as the icy breeze battered against the flickering fire. She tried not to appear as cold as she felt in front of Cirno and Claudette but still a shiver escaped her notice.

"Well," said Claudette, "I've got business to attend to so I'll be seeing you around."

And with that the shadows returned and clung to Claudette like a second skin, blending her perfectly into the night. She disappeared, her body melding into the darkness, the blue ribbons fastened to her brown ponytails were the last things that vanished from sight. The only sign of her passing being the sound of footsteps on the snow encrusted grass.

Speaking of snow, there was a fine layer of whiteness on everything now. The trees, bushes and even Flandre herself. Her brand new dress was now half white from the waist up. Her skin was turning an even paler form of white. Cirno had moved over to where Claudette had been standing and was peering out between the trees.

"Hey, Flandre. Come look at this."

The vampire strode over with a gloomy look on her face. Her wings were weighted down and dulled with frost. She kicked some of the snow on her way, cursing the cold weather under her misty breath.

"What's so important?" she moaned, before looking down herself. There was a sharp incline which stretched downwards not far from the treeline in which they stood, giving them a birds eye view of the valley below. A grand castle was the dominating feature which seemed as big and lavish as Remilia's mansion. Large towers

loomed out of the mist which masked much of the lower portions of the castle from view. A great keep stood silently in the centre, easily as big as a small town and was surrounded by fierce looking walls fitted with jagged spikes and ramparts.

"Its a castle," stated Flandre, impressed with the scale of the thing.

"Its a castle," echoed Cirno. "Wanna check it out?"

*Getting out of this cold hell would be great news indeed but I don't want Cirno to think that that is the main reason I want to investigate. I'm just not used to these horrible conditions.*

She nodded her head, some falling snow dropping from her hat as she did so.

"Yeah, lets have a look around. It beats doing nothing out here for sure and we might be able to find something fun. Something tasty to eat. Maybe even some treasure if we can get away with it."

Cirno's ears wiggled at the sound of treasure. She giggled, pointing into the air, stabbing at the castle with her finger. "Lets go then! We haven't a moment to lose."

They flew down into the valley. The air was covered in snow. The blizzard was quickly growing in intensity, turning the world into an icy wasteland. It hurt to even breath with the tiny fragments of ice polluting the air.

"Enough of this," snapped Flandre, erecting a simple shield to keep the speeding mush away from her shivering body. Should have done that a lot sooner, she thought. Still doesn't do anything about this horrible weather. In front of her, Cirno seemed to be having the time of her life. She was zooming along, dodging the snowflakes like danmaku and swatting the larger snowballs out of the sky with icy bullets of her own. She seemed to be in her own little world, completely in her element.

"I like to practice during blizzards," she called back to Flandre, raising her voice to be heard over the screaming winds. Flandre shrugged and pushed on through the storm, picking up speed. She was determined to get out of this mess as quickly as possible. Her wings glowed with each of their respective colours, creating a kind of rainbow effect which trailed behind her like streamers on a kite.

Ahead, the castle walls started to appear imposingly out of the mist. They criss-crossed past the trees, flew over the rivers and ducked under the forest canopy. Two little glowing dots in the air, hurtling towards the castle through a blizzard full of countless other white dots. They landed near a vast moat surrounding the castle wall. The moat wasn't blue water, but some yellowy substance which bubbled and hissed violently as snow dropped into it. Cirno and Flandre simply flew across it, wondering why they would even bother with such a thing in a world where mostly everyone could fly. Flandre reasoned it must be for artistic value, like the walls of her home mansion.

The castle walls themselves were black, heartless things. It looked very much like a thorn bush, bristling with cruel looking spikes and barbs. Ugly looking stone Gargoyles sat upon the wall, gazing down at the intruders below with impassive, empty eyes. The blizzard battered the walls who stood silently resolute against the strong gusting winds and endless barrages of ice and snow.

"So how do we get in?" asked Cirno, gazing up in awe at the wall which went up as far as she could see. Flandre shrugged, knocking against the wall with her knuckle.

"I dunno. Flying over would be easiest but blasting a hole through would be quicker and a lot more fun."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," said a voice from the blinding storm. Claudette strode out from seemingly nowhere, her cloak of shadows blowing away in the wind like dark mist. Flandre frowned, annoyed that she hadn't sensed her presence.



"You wouldn't want to tip them off that you've gained entry."

"What are you doing here?" asked Flandre. "And who are they?"

Claudette smiled, gazing up at the castle wall thoughtfully while holding up a black fingerless gloved hand to shield her face. "I just want to get inside and 'they' you ask? They would be the castle guards. Do you want to tag along with me? I'll get us inside no problem." She turned her head to regard Flandre with a sly smile. "That's what you want right?"

Flandre nodded, not wanting to wait around forever in this hellish cold. Whatever this woman wanted, if she could get them inside without any trouble, then it could only be a positive outcome. Claudette turned back to study the wall and began to walk along its length, tracing outlines with her fingers on the cold, black stone.

Cirno whispered in Flandre's ear. "She asked if we were bounty hunters. She must be up to no good."

Flandre watched as Claudette took off her backpack and set it down on the snowy earth, rummaging through it for something unseen.

"Probably, but its not like we're doing anything different, right?"

# Castle Crisis

Flandre followed the mysterious Claudette closely and watched her like a hawk as she stroked the castle stone like a loving mother. The black as night curtain wall was massive, stretching impressively up far, far above her head. It made her feel insignificant and small. The castle was the colour of night and blended in with it perfectly.

Cirno followed closely behind, trying her best to fit her steps inside Flandre's footprints in the snow. She moaned when a chain of ten successful steps was ruined by a slip of the foot. Flandre wondered when they would get out of this freezing blizzard which was only growing more intense by the minute. She shook some of the white slush off her new red fabric dress, shivering despite herself.

*Come on! What's taking so long? I want to get out of this now!*

The little vampire knocked on the castle wall like a door, testing the cold stones strength. She did it again, harder this time. Some of the stone cracked and broke under her might, pieces of it clattering to the ground before being swallowed up by the white sea of snow below. A network of cracks snaked out from the point of impact like a spiders web.

*I could just break us in in a second. None of this waiting around rubbish!*

"Quiet," Claudette said loudly, raising her voice to be heard over the howling wind which had steadily been growing in intensity as they trekked besides the gothic looking castle.

"I'm growing tired with this blizzard, Claudette. How much longer must I wait while a dry and sheltered home exists only on the other side of this wall?"

The red haired woman tutted, looking up at Flandre from her exploration of the barrier blocking the party's way. "We can't let Sevar and Yumeko catch on just yet, now can we?" she said with a sly smile.

Flandre frowned. "Who are they exactly?"

Claudette went back to almost hugging the dark wall, feeling for something with her nimble fingers. She answered while continuing her painstaking assessment.

"Sevar is the master of this gloomy, rather bleak looking castle. He isn't much to worry about himself but his minions are; particularly the head maid Yumeko. I heard she had been dismissed for failing to protect her former master or something so maybe she's not so hot after all? Ah, is this it?"

Her hands brushed up against an indentation in the stone but her sour expression told Flandre that it wasn't what she was so carefully searching for.

"Anyway," she continued. "The interior has many traps and obstacles for would-be intruders. Best that we avoid those without attracting any interference. See that plant for instance?"

Her semi gloved hand pointed to an unassuming series of vines growing on the curtain wall just up ahead from their position. Next, she picked up a small snow covered rock and flung it gently at the vines. The green vegetation suddenly came to life at the presence of nearby movement. Multiple barbs shot out of the plant and stabbed at the rock with deadly accuracy, flinging it away with a flashing contact spark. The vines chipped against the stone like flint, which lit the darkness for the merest second.

"See? It's in your best interest to be careful and surefooted around here. Not everything is what it seems."

"Wow," said Cirno, turning to see what her friend Flandre thought about the stealthy trap.

"That plant is deadly. Did you see the way it stabbed at that rock?"

Flandre gave a sharp nod, not liking the way that she was being treated like a clueless child. "As if a mere weed would cause me any problems," she replied dismissively.

Saying that reminded her of the poisoned tree. She was silent for a while after that.

The snow was really starting to thicken. It looked like someone had thrown a white sheet across her eyes as not a single shred of clear sky remained. It hammered at Flandre's shield, trying to find any weakness it could exploit so that it could claim her as it had done to the surrounding forest. The shield didn't keep her warm however and she grimly fought down the urge to batter down the castle wall to escape this frozen hell.

After some more feeling around Claudette announced that he had found what she was looking for. About time, Flandre thought. Her dress didn't cover the lower part of her slim legs and she was unused to the harsh, unforgiving outside weather. Only her vampire blood kept her from freezing over. It was hard to make out in the raging flurry but this section of the wall looked different from the rest of the cold black stone. Shadows swirled across it, slithering across it, hugging the castle wall like overgrown moss. Snow fell into it like it was a bottomless portal.

The black clad woman crouched down and extended her hand. Where her flesh met the shadows, it receded, like her touch was somehow deadly to it. She flung both her hands downwards in a dramatic criss-cross motion. The darkness clinging to the wall disappeared as if a strong breeze had blown it away. A weak looking section of the wall no larger than a kitchen table was revealed. Several stones were missing and the blocks were covered with chips and creaks across its length.

"I've been working on this section every night for the past week under cover of darkness," remarked Claudette behind her back.

"It was tedious work."

She let out a sigh, "but all good things come to those who wait."

She began to pull stones out of the wall, one after the other until there was a collection of them forming behind her back. The snowstorm worked hard to cover up her little mountain with its endless curtain of white frost. When Cirno moved forwards to help out her only reward was a quick rebuttal from the crouching woman. Claudette turned her head around angrily, the strong icy winds blowing strands of red hair against her face.

"Be careful," she hissed.

Cirno took a step back with a perplexed look on her face which rapidly turned into a mask of pure resentment when she was reminded by Claudette not to interfere in such a delicate task. She stuck her tongue out when Claudette had turned her back and stalked around the snow in a strop.

The fairy stopped periodically to freeze already frozen snow so that the added weight caused it to plummet into the white mush below her feet.

Flandre frowned, her red eyes glinting, not happy with her friends unfair mistreatment but she fought down her temper. She was determined to get inside this castle and so reminded silent for the time being.

It didn't take long after that and finally Claudette removed the last brick stone with diligent precision and placed it behind her with the others. She waved invitingly towards the hole, beckoning them inside. Flandre needed no further persuasion and moved out of the brutal coldness of the night and into this gloomy and mysterious castle, the powerful winds practically pushing her inside. She blinked

her eyes, adjusting to the low level light provided by the many candles that were mounted along the walls at regular intervals. The room they emerged into was vast with a high vaulted ceiling. It smelt dank and clammy inside.

The stone inside was as sole crushingly dark as the outside and black corridors stretched out further than the eye could see. Staircases lead up to a second floor complete with a balcony decorated with sharp spikes along its rails. Pictures of various rich and pompous old people lined one section of the wall while another had endless rows of dusty old cabinets filled with macabre objects such as bones, skulls and ordinate daggers. The interior of the castle was certainly as every bit as sinister as the great black wall that protected it.

*What a desolate atmosphere. Sister would be positively disgusted with such tasteless and ghastly decorations. She would probably say something like "My, my, how can someone treat their home with such blatant disrespect with these eyesores?" Then Sakuya would utter some form of polite agreement as usual.*

"Wow, what an old castle," gasped a wide eyed Cirno. "Look they even have suits of armour with swords and everything!"

Excited Cirno ran over to the nearest one and attempted to removed the sword from its lifeless figures but the knight's grip proved to strong for her.

"Stupid metal," she uttered, kicking it in the shin. Flandre spied a grand fireplace in the next room and smiled to herself, her red eyes reflecting the roaring flames. She started to walk towards it, rubbing her hands together in anticipation. Each step she took brought up a cloud of dust from the patchwork carpet below her feet. The candles cast strange shadowy shapes which flickered across the floor as she made her jouney

"Hey, Flandre! Help me opennnnn t-thisss," came a strained plea from the little fairy as she attempted to pull open a wood and iron chest

that was positioned between two looming obsidian statues of savage looking dogs. Her clear icy wings flapped as she heaved with all her might.

Urgh! I'm not walking over there, thought Flandre. She lifted her figure and shot off a blast that passed between the fairies legs and shattered the lock into pieces.

"Wahh!" yelled Cirno, who fell over heads over heels. "Oufff," he yelped as she landed in a heap, her blue dress draped across her head like a vale.

Flandre giggled, pleased with the unintended result. Her dress fluttered around her legs as she made for the other room. Something wet and cold like ice cream smacked into her back which caused her to yelp at the freezing touch and jump forwards in shock. Behind her it was Cirno's turn to grin as she watched the snowball smack home with a satisfyingly wet thud. The vampire grumbled as she brushed the slush off her back in annoyance, veins bulging in her forehead.

*That little flying menace sure has some nerve!*

Before she could act however, something green and translucent shot out of the chest behind Cirno and made an attempt to smother her. Flandre blinked her bright red eyes, only needing a millisecond to think and shot forward, her vampiric reflexes allowing her to act the moment danger was sighted.

She grabbed Cirno, and yanked her away in a whirl of blue. They landed in a heap together, the slimy green jelly like creature slamming into the floor where Cirno had just been standing. The carpet under it began to smoulder and cook as something within the thing ate away it it.

"What are ya doing?" Cirno said, her voice muffled by the fabric of her friends dress. Flandre snarled at the creature and blasted it into pieces as tendrils of goo reared up out of its body like a cheesy horror movie. The room was showered in hot snot coloured slime

that began to burn anything it touched. Several blobs hit the two girls as they pulled themselves free of each other. Flandre felt something hot burning on her back and shrieked in pain and began to wave her arms around frantically, running around like a headless chicken.

A few blobs of the toxic substance landed on Cirno. "Awwwww! Hot! hot!" she shrieked and shot out her arms, unleashing a miniature blizzard around herself which froze everything within a short distance including the harmful ooze. Flandre ran, desperately trying and failing in her panic to recite the words for a water spell as she slapped at her dress.

The smoke from her burning clothes only served to spur her on. She saw the opening in the wall complete with its blizzard that was trashing against the castle wall. *Forget staying warm! I need relief!* She shot out the hole as fast as a comet, a smoke trail following behind her and buried herself in the refreshing embrace of the chilly snow.

Flandre squirmed around just like someone making a snow angel, gleefully rubbing her back against the crusty snow. When she was satisfied and before it got too cold for comfort, she returned inside the gloomy castle.

*That fairy! It was all her fault! Opening things and being noisy!*

She scanned around inside the cavernous room until she spotted Cirno who was trying to free herself out of a cone of solid ice.

The prison was proving troublesome for the mischievous fairy to escape so like before, Flandre happily assisted her by annihilating the gleaming tower of ice in a brilliant display of fireworks. Cirno was thrown flat on her face amidst the frozen chunks which pinged off the walls like a pinball machine. She groaned, rubbing her forehead. The room experienced a brief taste of the outside as snowflakes fell from the air. Cirno looked up and then wishfully, remembering her favourite time of the year. She was dazed and held up her hand to grasp at the beautiful falling shapes.



*Ah, maybe it overdid it a little.*

Flandre went over, wondering where exactly Claudette had wandered off to. She hadn't seen the woman since coming inside and she was pretty sure she would have noticed if she had slipped away in a shadow. Flandre Scarlet shrugged and crouched over Cirno who was still mumbling to herself and grasping at something invisible in the air that only she could see. The vampire frowned and poked at her chilly white cheek.

"Come on, get up Cirno! Don't expect me to carry you because I won't!"

She grabbed Cirno by the shoulders and shook her. "Come on, come, commmeee onnn!"

Cirno gagged as Flandre manhandled her. "Ahhhyayyyyyyya," she went.

Flandre frowned, releasing her unfortunate patient. *This isn't getting me anywhere.* She glanced at the blizzard outside, wondering if the coldness would help Cirno, being an ice fairy and all. As she crouched there thinking she heard something zip through the air behind her. Something long and thin by her reckoning. She shuffled to the side a little and the object shot past her, casting a zipping sound as it rushed past her ear and impacted on the stone wall. It was an old rusty looking iron arrow with a decaying plume of feathers.

Flandre didn't wait out in the open for a second volley to hit her but was mindful enough to pick up Cirno and take her out of the line of fire. She parked Cirno behind the chest against the wall. Maybe the snarling stone dog statues would help to keep her safe. As silent as a mouse, Flandre flew upwards and set foot on the ceiling, completely upside down.

She crept across the top of the room, moving just as easily as if she were walking normally.

*Ha, I'm used to sneaking past Youkai as attentive and skilled as Sakuya and Meiling. No way anybody in this run down castle will be able to spot me.*

A faint creaking sound echoed down a hallway which was connected to the room that they had entered the castle. Creak, creak, creak. It sounded like a cog in a machine that hadn't been oiled for a good while.

The sound came into view. A suit of armour emerged out of the gloom, walking clumsily and wielding a crossbow in its silver gauntleted hands. It tracked the weapon from side to side, looking for its elusive pray. Flandre wasn't even that angry that this thing had tried to harm her as she was too astonished that they thought using arrows without ant kind of enchantment would achieve anything.

She sniffed the air, thinking. She detected no signs of life within the old armour but there was something magical attached to it. She paused and then started to stealthily creep across the ceiling once more, following the weak string of energy to its source. Along the way she saw more suits of armour of various styles aimlessly searching for enemies in the enormous hallways and rooms of the castle.

She smiled broadly, finding her prey standing behind a great marble column. It looked like a mage, just like that old fool she had dealt with before in the forest. He was busy directing his mindless minions to do his bidding.

*Yes that's right, I found you. Keep ordering around your playthings, fool.*

Finally finding something living to pin the unforgivable crime of trying to harm her felt almost cathartic.

*The sword of judgement is hanging right over his head!*

Like a spider eyeing its catch, Flandre quietly dropped from the ceiling and landed without so much as a whisper behind the sorcerer.

*Pathetic, he doesn't even know how close to death he really is.*

I can see the blood flowing through the veins in his neck she thought as she stared at her victim, seemingly caught in a trance. Some kind of red mist clouded her mind. Her mouth watered and her red eyes glowed a little brighter. Her two fangs grew, protruding from her mouth, as sharp as daggers. A small breath escaped her lips.

The small urge to feed that was always at the back of a vampire's mind grew and grew until it threatened to overwhelm her. The mage started to move, perhaps alerted to Flandre's presence, perhaps not. Either way, Flandre pounced, lunging forwards and digging her gleaming fangs into the soft flesh of her prey's neck.

The mage struggled, stumbling around and tried to shout out, to call for help. He dropped his staff in a blind panic and tried to reach around and pull Flandre off his back but the vampire had a grip as strong as iron and latched onto him even tighter, biting into him and leeching away huge amounts of blood.

He stumbled into a golden candle holder and knocked it over. His wounds bled profusely, seeping through his robes until they turned a dirty crimson shade of red. One of his hands brushed against Flandre's face, trying to find some grip to wrench her off. Flandre snarled at this and snapped his arm with a sickening bone crunching sound. His fighting became weaker and his whimpering softer until he fell over on the floor. The candle was still burning brightly on the stone floor, illuminating the grisly scene unfolding before it.

Flandre drank deeply, revealing in the thrill of hunting down her own food for once. You could see that she was smiling in total heavenly bliss, even though her mouth was dug into the now dead man's neck.

*Blood is so tasty, so exquisite. The texture, the strong flavour, the pungent smell, the sensation as it flowed down your throat. There is nothing else like it in the world!*

This flavour in particular was very rich with a high red blood cell count. Much more pure and concentrated than she was used to. Perhaps it was because this was fresh from the source. She wasn't sure where Sakuya got her usual meals from and whenever she brought up the subject, she was always told dismissively to ask the mistress.

Remilia would always tell her in a condescending tone that she should not worry herself and leave everything to her loving sister. Flandre thought about the mansion, sister and feeding time, the thoughts hazy and distant in her mind until the red mist lifted from her eyes and she returned to her normal state of being.

Flandre realized that there was no longer any more blood for her to suck and released the mage who slumped to the floor in a heap, his neck a jagged ruin. In her cloudy memory, Flandre only remembered biting down a single time. Sister always said that Flandre was a messy eater and needed to be fed like a newborn child. Well, she never used those exact words but the message was loud and clear to Flandre who hated being looked down upon and treated like a baby. She grudgingly put up with it however because she loved her sister and didn't want to cause her any problems or disappointments.

There was what seemed like an endless lake of blood pooling around the two figures, staining the black as night stone floor a deep shade of red. Flandre stood up, catching sight of a mirror mounted on the far side of the vast room. As usual she could see nothing, the mirror seemingly denying her existence like it was mocking her. Flandre bared her teeth in a cruel looking grin.

She grabbed onto the pillar and pulled away a small chunk of stone which she threw at the mirror, shattering it in a shower of reflective shards. It reflected everything but her and that's why she hated them.

*Why should I be left out? What's wrong with me?*

Sakuya made sure that there were no mirrors near her dwelling area and the fairies usually covered them up with white cloths whenever she attending dinner in the main hall.

She held her hands up to her face. They were covered in blood. She could feel that the same was true for her face as well. The warm sensation on her skin was pleasing to her but she didn't want Cirno to see her like this. It might give her the wrong impression. Her eyes blinked, the fairy's name flashing through her mind.

She'd better check up on her little icy companion now that the immediate threat had been dealt with. She soared upwards gracefully on her multicoloured wings, returning to the upside down world of the castle ceiling and sprinted across it silently like an autumn breeze. Each step she took kicking up centuries old dust.

Several suits of armour lay lifelessly on the floor in disorganized heaps, robbed of the magic that had held them together. They were like dolls that had had their strings cut, as silent as the castle walls that surrounded them. Flandre entered the room where she had hidden her dazed fairy friend. She dropped down on the second floor balcony that overlooked the vast room.

Several doors lead off from the balcony and Flandre wondered if one of them contained a bathroom so that she could quickly wash her face and hands. Voices down below made her jump out of her thoughts. She peered between the spiky banisters. Five figures were standing below.

Four of them wore the same kind of clothing as the mage. Brown robes complete with hoods which nether of them wore. Flandre spotted the gleam of armour beneath the dull looking cloth.

*Could these men be knights?*

She'd read about them but had never actually seen one in person.

The last figure was unlike the others. This striking female wore the clothing of a maid but unlike the traditional black, her dress was as brightly red as a full bloomed rose. She was tall and athletic looking and had long wavy blonde hair which sat under a frilly maid's headdress.

Flandre listened in. One of the knights nervously remarked that they had not yet found a thief that had infiltrated the castle. That must be Claudette, thought Flandre. The maid replied coldly that they had better double their efforts or she would personally see that they were punished severely. The men gulped nervously and two of them quickly ran off to search. Next, she ordered the two remaining men to search this room and leave no stone unturned. Flandre's eyes widened.

*They would surely find Cirno if nothing was done!*

Cirno however saved them the trouble of a lengthy search. She had regained some of her senses but still looked a little scatterbrained. She stumbled out clumsily between the stone dogs, leaning on one statue for support. She rubbed the back of her neck and looked at the three figures while her mind tried to process the unfamiliar faces.

"Who're you?" Cirno asked as she rubbed her throbbing forehead.

The maid smiled humorlessly and replied in an icy tone, "That's what I would like to know, fairy."

She pointed at Cirno and ordered the guards to restrain her immediately. The knights nodded and moved forwards, flexing their gauntleted hands. Flandre's heart began thump rapidly against her chest and she tightly squeezed the pillar that she was hiding behind, digging claw marks into the hard stone.

Stupid Cirno! Stupid, stupid!

Well there was nothing for it now. Flandre jumped over the banister and landed on the ground, her shoes clapping on the carpeted floor

one by one.

"Leave her alone!" she screamed.

## Maid for Trouble

The two motley knights and maid turned as one at the sudden intrusion as the young scarlet vampire yelled at the top of her lungs for them to leave her friend alone. Cirno rubbed her eyes, focusing on the new character that had entered the play. She recognized the wings and mouthed Flandre's name but it was too soft for anyone to hear.

"Who're you?" asked one of the guards in a guff tone. All right, thought Flandre. *I have their attention, now all I need to do is keep it until Cirno has recovered her senses.*

"You stay away from my fairy. She works for me, understand?" she said, taking a deep breath and pointing at herself with a profound sense of self-importance.

"Mistress Yumeko?" asked one of the men, hesitant to make a move without sanction. The maid looked at Flandre for a moment with a bored expression and waved a hand at her. The guard grinned and unsheathed a long, sharp looking silver sword from his belt before advancing on the waiting vampire.

Flandre looked up at him. Thinking of them as knights was a mistake. Upon a closer look, they were just dirty, unwashed humans in drab looking clothing with rusty chainmail. This guard in particular smelled of cabbage mixed with something else that she'd rather not place for now.

*Sister would've label him as unfit for vampiric consumption.*

"Don't try and fight now," he said while wearing that stupidly confident grin. "Wouldn't want to hurt you now."

When he was within arms length he reached out a hand to grab her. Flandre watched with repulsion as his patchworked gloved hand



closed in on her, his many digits clasping the empty air like a spiders legs.

"You're disgusting!" she spat as she shoved him away with such force that he was flung backwards. His sword clattered to the ground as his body skidded across the stone floor like a rock skipping across water until his ragdoll form smacked into the castle wall, shaking the sparkling chandelier above. Dusty particles drifted down from it on invisible currents of wind.

Yumeko sighed and folded her arms. "Looks like this place will need a good cleaning now. You," she indicated the remaining guard who was looking at the crumpled form of his companion with shock.

"Don't space out, fool," she snapped. "Deal with the fairy."

That seemed to worry him into action and he turned his attention to Cirno while fumbling to remove his sword from its scabbard. Flandre moved a single step in their direction, intending to stop whatever he planned to do but the maid casually interposed herself between them. She locked Flandre with a cruel stare. Her yellow eyes faintly glowing with a cold radiance.

"Get out of my way or you'll end up the same," Flandre threatened. She could see that she needed to act immediately if she was to prevent the guard from reaching Cirno.

Yumeko sneered at this warning. "Try and get past me, if you dare," she mocked, holding a hand in front of her mouth as she chuckled to herself.

"It's my job to keep the castle clean and that includes vermin like you two," she said, looking down on Flandre like she was but a mere insect compared to her. Her mocking tone infuriated Flandre to no end. Her fists were shaking at her sides. Her fingernails extended themselves as well as her dagger like fangs.

All she wanted at that very moment was for this maid in front of her to cease to exist.

"Did I make you angry?" added Yumeko, smiling. That was all Flandre could take. She yelled and launched herself at her tormentor, her legs propelling her forwards at blinding speeds.

Yumeko was slow to react in her confidence. She blinked her eyes only once and when they opened a raging vampire was charging at her with a look of murder. Flandre was almost on top of her before she began to act. She yelped in surprise and assumed a fighting stance as best as she could.

"Don't think you can-" Yumeko began before Flandre coiled her legs back and leapt, her arms extended either side of her as she glided in to attack. The vampire's left arm swiped but Yumeko backed away just enough to avoid it but her fancy footwork couldn't avoid the right hand. Sharp talons raked across her chest, tearing the white fabric below her neck and drawing blood. Yumeko grimaced at the pain while ducking under a slash that would have split her face in two and used the momentum to push herself away from the berserk onslaught.

The scent of fresh blood excited Flandre and helped to push her into a frenzy. Her hungry gaze tracked her prey as it tried to put some distance between them, ducking and dodging but she didn't give Yumeko a second to catch her breath and matched her step for step. A flurry of blows rained down on Yumeko but her supple body and elastic reflexes barely kept her safe as Flandre tried to cut her into ribbons with an endless rain of deadly strikes.

A claw scraped Yumeko's forearm painfully as she aimed her hand downwards and blasted the stone flooring with a quick spell, throwing up a thick torrent of grey dust. Flandre coughed and blinked rapidly as some of the harmful particles drifted into her scarlet eyes. She rubbed at them and saw something bright coming at her head from within the mist.

She ducked as a silver sword cut through the dust cloud and slashed in a circular arc, brushing against her golden hair as it sailed just above her scalp. A decapitating blow, if it had landed. Another weapon cut at her legs. With nowhere to go but up she leapt into the air, her wings thrusting her upwards on multicoloured currents of energy.

"Nice try," Flandre called out from her vantage point, hovering above the room. "Wouldn't your master be annoyed if you damage his castle?"

*This is fun. A real battle of life and death, with everything on the line.*

It added that little edge of excitement that danmaku duels could never replicate. The dust cloud was starting to disperse but Flandre could still make out Yumeko's hidden form in the grey soot from the maid's body heat. Her aura was a fierce fiery red compared to the lifeless stone around her.

Yumeko arched back her arms and threw the twin swords that she had been holding towards the ceiling like they were javelins. With deadly accuracy they zoomed through the air, two swords gleaming sharply in the otherwise gloomy atmosphere. In Flandre's vision all she saw was two brief sparkles before the snaking weapons threatened to piece her heart.

Rather than gambling that she could avoid them completely, she instead flew directly at them. Twisting her body in such a way that would cause her to pass between the deadly blades. She knew that she was too large to escape harm so when they were moments from stabbing into her flesh she reached out carefully and slapped each blade off course while taking care to strike the length of them and not the harmful, sharp edges.

Flandre's ears prickled as they sensed something behind her back but she hadn't seen anything else come from the maid. Still, she trusted her ears and cranked her neck around to see yet another sword on a collision course with her poor little body. Her face visibly

paled. Having seen it at the very last moment, she hastily combusted some air by superheating it with a fire spell which blasted the weapon off course and away from its dangerous path.

It stabbed into the ceiling with a loud clang as Flandre drifted down once again to the stone floor. Yumeko tutted, disappointed that the attack had failed. She watched the younger scarlet sister with a look of malice while she pulled out a pristine handkerchief and dabbed at her arm. Warm blood had stained the white areas of her clothing just above her breasts. At least they matched the rest of her crimson maid outfit, thought Flandre. Her nose wrinkled as it sniffed the sweet scent of blood in the air.

*I wonder what Yumeko tastes like?*

She licked her lips. A rich flavour if her pallet was correct and it usually was when it came to her beloved nectar. The maid wasn't smirking anymore. Instead she seemed much more wary with a hint of irritation which Flandre noticed with no small amount of triumph.

*That will teach you to not underestimate a Scarlet!*

Still, something was nagging at the back of her mind. Something very important. It struggled to push itself to the forefront as Flandre's more primal instincts swirled around inside her like a strong, addictive drug.

*Cirno!*

Her jaw opened in shock, alarmed that she had almost forgotten what she had set out to do in the first place.

Her eyes frantically scanned around and found her fairy friend who hadn't taken a single step from her last position. A new ice statue of a guard now decorated the room besides Cirno. His face forever frozen with a look of utter disbelief, his arms outstretched, his gaze aimless. Flandre sighed with relief. She shouldn't have underestimated her companion's strength but she had been so

caught up with trying to save her and act the part of the hero. Cirno caught her gaze and smiled while she continued to cheer Flandre on and congratulate her dazzling display. Yumeko stood in between them.

In fact the two combatants had ended up in almost the exact same positions that they had been standing in before their little dance. Yumeko had tied the stained handkerchief around her arm as a bandage, covering the scratch on her forearm. She rotated her arm in a circular rotation while flexing her wrist.

"I'm disappointed that I allowed myself to be taken advantage of like that," she said, not making eye contact. "It won't happen again, that I can assure you."

Flandre smirked. *Still trying to act tough are we?* Cirno was eagerly awaiting her friend's next move and Flandre had no intentions of disappointing her. *Better put on a good show for the audience.* She pointed at the maid while wearing the most condescending grin she could manage.

"You barely survived just now and you still have the nerve to mouth off at me? You should stick to dusting and cleaning and leave the fighting to me." She waved Yumeko away, dismissing her in the same trivial fashion that Sakuya would do to a fairy maid.

"If you apologise to us both I might just forgive you and let you leave."

Yumeko scowled but maintained her composure. She narrowed her eyes and opened a hand. A shaft of light started to form inside her palm that was made up of countless shining orbs that multiplied in number in a flash. The orbs grew and bonded together, twisting and weaving until they formed a recognizable shape. A longsword as fresh and unblemished as one newly forged in the blacksmith's workshop now found itself in Yumeko's hand. If you had merely taken the time to blink, you might have missed the whole thing.

"Don't get cocky, brat. You don't know who your dealing with. Your little run of success ends here, this I swear." She pointed her sword at Flandre, issuing a clear challenge.

*A brat am I? What a stuck up bitch. Just because I age slow everyone thinks that I'm some little kid that needs to head off to school. Humpf. I'll enjoy the look of anguish of her face as she looks up at me and begs for mercy. Still, that sword does look familiar. The silver colouring, the embellished hilt with roses and thorns wrapped around it. It looks completely identical to those that the guards held.*

She risked a glance downwards and sure enough that oaf that she had dispatched had lost his sword. It was nowhere to be seen at all. That had been the source of the rearward attack.

*Ah, so this maid has mastery over swords much like Sakuya has a fondness for knives. Or perhaps only her own blades which the guards carry? And that name, Yumeko. Claudette mentioned something about her. Ah yes, that was it.*

"It's you who has no idea who your dealing with but I do know a little bit about you, Yumeko. I'm surprised that anyone in there right mind would hire you after you failed so miserably to protect your former master."

The side of Yumeko's face twitched and her mouth quivered with silent outrage. She tightened her grip on the hilt of her sword.

*Hit a nerve did I?*

In times past, Flandre sometimes snuck out to the gatehouse where she liked to spent time talking with Meiling. Hong Meiling was pretty laid back and didn't automatically report her every single movement to sister, unlike some other names that she could mention. On a few occasions she taught Flandre a few simple fighting concepts like never letting your guard down and making the enemy angry so that they would be off balance and more likely to make mistakes.

Flandre thought that she was doing a pretty good job right about now but it wasn't just a simple game of tactics for her. She enjoyed running stuck up types up the wrong way. The vampire made a sweeping gesture, taking in the grand spacious room with a wave of her hand.

"It seems to me that the master of this house must be senile to have someone like you in his employ." Flandre shrugged, her diamond wingtips dangling like a wind-chime as she did so. "Or maybe he just took pity on you."

That was all Yumeko could take.

"Don't pretend to know anything about me," she shouted, her voice trembling with rage.

"You intrude into this castle! Break things, kill my minions and insult me! Don't think you will walk away from this unharmed! That goes for both of you!"

She raised her sword in front of her and stared intently at something in the reflection. Flandre was feeling pretty pleased with herself so it took her a second to put the pieces together but when she did she shouted a warning at Cirno but it was too late. The sword that belonged to the now frozen guard shook as an invisible hand took hold of it and gently lifted it up off the stone floor.

Then, suddenly and without warning, it shot up at the fairy's head with a mind of its own. Cirno jerked her head back and yelped as the blade stopped just short of cutting into the soft flesh around her neck. She saw her own panicked reflection on the sword's gleaming surface staring back at her but it made no further move and seemed content for the moment to just float in midair while it held the fairy hostage with the very deadly threat of a slit throat.

Flandre immediately took a step forwards.

"Stop right there," spat Yumeko, still looking into her sword. "Move again and I'll make your friend there a full head smaller than she already is."

Flandre froze in mid stride before stopping dead. She couldn't tear herself away from how close the sword was from Cirno's neck. It was just hovering there, suspended in time. It looked like one stiff breeze could knock it off its precarious axis with disastrous results.

"You dirty-", Flandre muttered before reigning herself in with a sense of self-control that surprised even her. She let out a breath. Now was not the time to antagonize her opponent even further. Once again, Meiling's voice appeared in her mind. Appear fierce on the outside but calm on the inside. Flandre usually had no problem following the first part of the mantra, but it was the second one that she needed to channel if she hoped to save Cirno unharmed.

Yumeko chuckled, her mouth twisting into a cruel smile. "That's right. Not so mouthy now, are we?" she said before yelling "Guards!" at the top of her lungs. Her call echoed throughout the castle's seemingly endless corridors and chambers.

"I bet you heard that rubbish from that rotten bitch of a thief Claudette. Not very surprising that she didn't stick around long enough to help her lackeys. She has a habit of suckering in fools to serve her purposes and I doubt you two are professional thieves. You look much too simple minded for that kind of thing. I wonder why someone like her would bring along two little ones along for the ride and then abandon them at the earliest opportunity?"

Flandre knew what she was implying and didn't like the conclusion one bit but to buy precious time she acted dumb. This maid sure loved to hear herself speak while acting all superior so Flandre indulged her for the time being.

"What are you getting at?" Flandre growled.



Yumeko laughed. "Isn't it obvious. That thief managed to breach the castlewall without being detected and yet tripped every magical alarm centred around this room on her way out. She's using you as bait and you're too stupid to realize it. Well, when I'm done with you two, I'll be free to take care of her. Now on the off chance that you actually know what she was after, why don't you be a nice little girl and tell me or I might have a slip of concentration. Controlling these elegant swords isn't as easy as I make it out to be."

*Damn it. How can I get Cirno out of this unscathed?*

Cirno was looking at her in a pleading fashion, asking her for help. Flandre could see the worry in her pale, blue eyes. She had to do something! She would only have the briefest of seconds to move before Yumeko had the chance to do anything. There were a countless number of spells that she could pull off in that short time. Blasting the sword apart wasn't an option as even though she was sure that she could hit it dead on, the fragments of super heated metal would tear anything near them to pieces.

No, there had to be another way. Yumeko was watching Cirno through the reflection cast on the smooth surface of her sword while at the same time carefully keeping Flandre in her sights. Her golden eyes watched them both like a hawk on either side of the sliver sword that neatly divided her face.

Flandre would have to interfere with her concentration for just enough time for Cirno to pull away safely. Vampires had many powers and one of them was to hypnotize lesser creatures into doing their bidding. This was very useful on simple humans but largely useless in the mystical world of Gensokyo where seemingly every being had some kind of spiritual understanding. She had never been as good at it as her elder sister but still, she only needed the merest second.

*Surely I can manage that? If I cannot, then Cirno...*

*No, I must succeed! I will succeed!*

Yumeko was already staring with intense concentration at her, watching for any possible movement. Flandre could feel those twin, yellow eyes burning into the back of her skull. She wanted Yumeko to stop scrutinizing her so intently but on the other hand it would make what she was about to attempt much easier.

*That's right. Stare right into my gaze like I'm your entire world.*

She pushed all the negative and unnecessary thoughts out of her mind like how much she wanted to punch Yumeko's face in and tried her best to enter that place of weightlessness and calm that resided in everyone's soul. She stared back at Yumeko, concentrating, trying to impose her will over her target's mind. Just a simple command, as the simpler, the easier it would be to execute.

*Don't move. Don't move a single muscle. Just relax and let everything go.*

Flandre's red eyes glowed like a pair of little miniature furnaces powered by her very soul.

*You've worked very hard. Just rest yourself for just a moment but hold onto your magnificent swords. They belong to you. Your precious possessions. Don't let them slip away from you. Hold them tightly as you enter tranquillity.*

Yumeko's gaze wavered a little. Flandre dearly hoped that she wouldn't realize what was happening and break eye contact. There was no telling what she might do. The scarlet vampire continued her subtle suggestions, trying her best to coax her into an empty minded state. It had only lasted about five seconds but still, it was taking far too long. Why was it taking this long?

Before, she had managed to fully control a fairy maid within five seconds and here it was only a simple suggestion. Beads of sweat rolled down her frustrated forehead. She fought to control her racing heart rate which was trying it's best to beat it's way right out of her chest. She heard footsteps coming from the room with the fireplace.

Guards most likely. More than ten sets of footsteps by her count. She pushed the thought away, trying to focus. She had very little time. Yumeko noticed them as well and grinned, growing more confident with the imminent arrival of backup.

"Looks like your time is up," she said coldly. "Don't resist when they take you or I might just let my hand slip. I do so hate blood stains. They are so difficult to get out."

*Damn it.*

Flandre couldn't do it and already ten, long seconds had already passed. Any longer and Yumeko might notice what she was trying to do and then the game would be up. Already Yumeko's gaze was widening, her forehead arching upwards as a realization dawned on her. Flandre would have to give it her all and risk a vocal command.

Her irises glowed and ignited into a dazzling shade of red, she opened her lips and with real power and force of will she commanded Yumeko not to move even an eyelid. The maid still stared at her but her eyes were clear and without focus, the yellow centre seemingly dull and without her usual cold malice. Yumeko's expression had turned completely blank. Her perfectly positioned stance faulted, her swords wavering.

"Get out of the way Cirno!" Flandre screamed. "I've stopped her movements!"

Cirno took one quick glance at the blade that was held at her neck, still looking as threatening as ever and jerked herself away from it with all the force that she could manage like suddenly it had turned into a red-hot poker and was burning her. She flew upwards towards the ceiling. The warning snapped Yumeko out of her trance and she snarled in anger at this little girl's sheer insolence. The sword that had been holding Cirno at knife point for what seemed like an eternity flew upwards with blinding speed but its target was no longer there.

Cirno breathed a sigh of relief as she watched the shining weapon shoot upwards and embed itself into the wooden outer rim of the chandelier above with a loud ping, causing it to rock on its chain in a wide circle. While Flandre had the chance, she summoned up a twisting hollow circle of water with a little patch of fire burning destructively at its core and flung it at Yumeko. That had been one of Patchouli's elemental lessons in magic and she had only remembered it because it had been branded dangerous.

As it travelled through the air, the fire at its core heated up the swirling sphere of water around it, boiling it up to a high temperature. Yumeko instinctively blocked it with her sword but the burning water splashed around it and coated her in scolding hot liquid. She cried out in pained agony, covering her face with one hand while flying backwards to escape the expected attack that would come with it but instead Flandre was rushing towards Cirno.

She had long since made the decision to get Cirno out of here instead of trying to finish off the vicious maid. It was too dangerous to fight her and whatever guards might be coming while also worrying about the fairy's wellbeing. Better to get her somewhere safe first and then she could take her sweet time and enjoy the duel while not having to worry about unleashing her true power.

"Good job getting that horrible maid!" cheered Cirno, waving at her with a smile. "Let me have a crack at her. I'll show her not to mess with-"

Flandre launched herself upwards and grabbed Cirno's hand before flying away from the room with the chilly icy fairy in tow. Cirno protested and tried to squirm and wiggle herself free but Flandre wrapped her other arm carefully around her waste, hugging Cirno tightly so that she couldn't escape her embrace. She winced as her skin brushed up against Cirno's freezing, icy wings. Her own wings folded behind her, producing a glowing trail of colours as they propelled her and her passenger beneath a towering archway sculptured with angels that looked down on judgement on those that dared to pass underneath them.

Flandre glanced behind her and saw Yumeko flailing blindly with her sword in hand, cutting at anything nearby in a storm of ferocity and smirked to herself, thinking that it served her right. Yumeko chopped a flower pot off its table. It smashed onto the ground, spilling earth all over the flooring. She watched Flandre leave through tightly clenched fingers, her hand clasped over her scolding cheeks. She muttered something to herself and spat.

Guards flooded the room, their boots marching with a rhythmic thumping sound as they fanned out and covered the spacious chamber with drilled practice. Several men walked up to Yumeko and anxiously asked what had happened here. She thrust her sword at the nearest one, dangling it threateningly inches from his face.

"They went out the north exit," she screamed. "Two of them! Find them or I'll slaughter every last one of you!"

The guards knew that she was deadly serious and sprung into panicked alertness. They ran as fast as their legs would carry them, partly because they feared what would happen if they let the intruders escape and partly to put as much distance between them and Yumeko as possible. None of them wanted to hang around and risk their mistress' displeasure and that was ignoring the fact that she was literally shacking with a potent mixture of pain and simmering anger.

Elsewhere, Flandre was flying through a series of dark, twisting corridors and rooms while searching for a path of escape. She wasn't too worried about not finishing her battle with Yumeko as she was sure that they would cross paths again. Flandre also hoped that she would run into Claudette along the way. She had a few pointed questions to ask the mysterious lady.

## Chilly Misfortune

"Hey, where are we going?" asked Cirno as she strained to see past Flandre's swinging butt as it swayed from side to side in front of her. "Straight ahead," replied Flandre. "And keep your voice down. We need to be stealthy, got it?"

The two, having escaped from their precarious entrance to the castle had found a vent located in one of the neighbouring rooms and had infiltrated into a large series of air ducts. The one they found themselves in now was only tall enough to allow them to crawl on their hands and knees.

Flandre had been forced to tuck her wings uncomfortably behind her back in order to fit inside the tight space. It was also filthy with dust and cobwebs everywhere. Flandre wondered how Yumeko could consider herself a maid with this kind of blatant neglect. She released at that moment that she and sister were very lucky to have someone as dedicated as Sakuya leading the staff at the scarlet devil mansion.

*Maybe I shouldn't call her stuffy Sakuya anymore?*

She considered it for a whole two seconds before dismissing the notion entirely.

*Sakuya is stuffy! That's what makes her such a good maid.*

"Hey," came Cirno's soft voice behind her. "Why didn't you let me freeze that annoying maid solid? I was just about to give her some serious payback!"

The words echoed down the shaft, eventually travelling out of earshot.

"Really?" said Flandre incredulously. "It looked like you were in serious trouble to me and needed the superstar Flandre to save

you."

Cirno's face flushed red. "She just caught me by surprise, that's all. I was just about to bust out one of my secret, ultimate techniques! Then she would have been sorry for messing with us!"

*Uh huh*, thought Flandre, smiling at the fairies sheer bravado.

*Still trying to act all tough, are we? Maybe you could have beaten that deplorable maid but I'm not taking the chance to gamble with your life. If she could get a sword at your throat like that in the blink of an eye then it's better that I punish her in your place.*

"Just let me worry about Yumeko. I have plenty of experience dealing with troublesome maids."

"At your home?" asked a curious Cirno.

Flandre nodded. Then after a brief pause, she realized that her gesture wouldn't have been seen by her little friend, what with her being behind her and such, so instead responded with a simple "Yes."

A cold breeze blew down the shaft, brushing against the vampires skin with an icy chill. Damn it, thought Flandre.

*I should have made Cirno go first. Now I'm surrounded by coldness on both sides.*

She sighed. The reason that she had chosen to go first is that she was confident in her near perfect night vision so it was only natural that she take the lead but now she found herself with an ice fairy behind her and a stiff, bone chilling wind up front. She shivered, shaking her head. Not for the first time she envied Cirno's natural tolerance to cold climates.

Cirno held up a hand in front of her mouth to cough as she breathed in some muck kicked up from her companions crawling and instantly

regretted it when she felt something slimy. She turned her palm around in horror to reveal that her pure white skin was now caked in grey soot and some kind of greenish, humid moisture. Cirno winced, gagging at the unpleasant sight. She had just wiped her mouth with that hand!

"Ewwwwww," she moaned and jerked forwards, butting head first into Flandre.

"What's the problem back there?" Flandre asked, cranking her head back with some difficulty in the limited space to see what the disturbance was.

"This place is disgusting," complained Cirno who was sticking her tongue out and gasping for air like she had eaten a red hot chilly pepper. Black patches of soot were spread randomly across her blue head of hair and her clothing, hands and knees hadn't fared much better.

"When can we get out of here?" she sobbed. "This place is disgusting!"

Flandre rolled her eyes.

"As soon as we find an exit. Now stop complaining. I'm not your mother so stop expecting me to hold your hand every step of the way."

*Sheesh, this fairy never seems to stop moaning. You don't see me moaning like a little girl, well, at least not out loud.*

It had taken a lot of persuasion to simply stop her from returning to Yumeko for some payback and potentially getting herself cut to ribbons in the process. Shuffling her inside the air duct had been a whole new challenge and in the end Flandre had had to forcibly drag her inside kicking and screaming. It seemed like she was having to constantly babysit her every move. Flandre mused that maybe this



fairy needed her guidance in the same way that the fairy maids looked up to Remilia and Sakuya.

Maybe if she gathered up enough fairies she would be able to have her own personal maids within the mansion. The vision made her feel giddy as she turned back around and crawled absent-mindedly right into a clingy spiders web. The silky threads formed a tingly mask across her face. She stifled a panicked cry, trembling at the unsettling sensation. If a spider had walked across her cheek with its eight abominable legs, she might have blown her top then and there.

*Urgh! Get it off! Get this horrible thing off my face!*

"Why'd you stop moving?" asked Cirno who almost drove head first into her again.

Mindful of her previous words and with real difficulty, Flandre bit her lip and replied "N-nothing, I-lets keep going."

It was tough to keep her voice level with that clingy floss all over her face. Flandre felt her blood boiling. Her skin crawled and she wanted nothing more than to jump up and shout at the top of her lungs for the fairy maids to run her a hot, soothing bath along with her favorite cherry soap. Since such a thing was impossible, Flandre felt like blasting something, anything, but settled for cursing under her breath as she frantically swatted the webbing away from her face.

"Stupid freeloading spiders," she muttered quietly as they crawled down the narrow passageway. Flandre's ears flickered as she heard a faint spinning drown throbbing somewhere up ahead. The tendrils of filth that hung from the ceiling like tasteless decorations swayed as the increasing wind current pushed against them. The crawling pair both grimaced as they carefully ducked underneath them whenever necessary.

*That's a strange, unfamiliar sound. I wonder what it could be?*

The passageway widened ahead. Flandre relayed this to Cirno who greeted the much welcomed news with childish glee.

They hopped out of the narrow confines of the air duct and into a wide open square space which was tall enough to stand upright. It was drab and empty of life but that was to be expected. The walls were stained with sticky condensation. Stalactites hung from the ceiling, giving the impression that they had walked into a miniature cave. Several metal pipelines snaked overhead and disappeared into the walls but by far the most dominating feature was a large metallic fan that stretched from floor to ceiling. The spinning blade cut the room in two and there was no obvious way past it.

Flandre stretched her limbs, moaning in relief at the freedom of movement. The constant humming of the fan made the floor vibrate. Small fragments of stone hopped and danced beneath her feet. Looking downwards, she noticed that her shoes were very scuffed from all the crawling that they had done and that her beautiful red dress was now marked with revolting dust.

She patted it down, kicking up a cloud of soot as she did so. She coughed, waving her hands as the invading particles tried to get inside her nose and mouth. Not for the first time, Flandre questioned whether discretion really was the better part of valor.

*I might as well have just jumped into a rubbish bin.*

Cirno popped out behind her and gazed in wonder at her new surroundings. "Whoa. Look at that giant spinning thing Flandre! Its huge!" she said, holding out her arms as far as they could go. The fairy's words echoed faintly around the room. She wondered right up to it, sticking her face dangerously close. The strong air current blew her hair all over the place. All Flandre could see of the fairy was a storm of blue hair whirling around manically like crushing waves of water as they slammed onto the rocks.

Cirno opened her mouth and yelled "Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh," right into the fan blades. Her voice became comically distorted and changed

into a vibrating, wavering gaggle of words that sounded like someone was beating on her vocal cords like a drum. When Cirno had finished her little experiment she giggled at herself and asked if Flandre wanted to try it out but the vampire just waved her away, still somewhat stifled. That and the endless droning sound was beginning to grate on her nerves.

"Awwww, come on Flandre. Its fun!" Cirno pleaded in her most convincing voice while trying to look all innocent so that Flandre couldn't help but comply or risk hurting her delicate feelings. Then, when it became apparent that she was now being ignored she shrugged and muttered under her breath, "Well, you're no fun, miss stropky bat."

Flandre's wings flinched as she picked up the insult. The individual crystals danged like a wind chime.

"Hey," snapped Flandre, piping up. "I can hear you you know."

She coughed again and kicked a stone which skipped across the stone flooring until it fell into the whirling fan blades. Flandre heard a sharp ping as the rock was flung outwards like a speeding comet.

"I'm fun," she declared, placing a hand on her chest dramatically like she was on a podium addressing a crowd. "I'm just sick of these dirty, dusty, dank tunnels. Lets go somewhere else."

Cirno frowned. "Well you're the one who wanted-"

"L-lets not worry about that," Flandre stammered, realizing that it was actually her own fault that they were even down here in the first place. Then in an attempt to change the subject she pointed towards the immense spinning fan which barred their way. The metal forks were moving so quickly that they blurred together, creating an impenetrable barrier of spinning metal.

"We need to get on the other side of that."

Cirno panned her pale blue eyes across the colossal fan, thinking. "Hmmmmmm," she mumbled, looking thoughtfully at the surrounding supports which held it firmly in place and then down at her shoes for no apparent reason.

Flandre was beginning to think that her companion had slipped into a coma when Cirno's head shot up like she had just experienced some kind of divine revelation, making Flandre almost jump out of her skin. Cirno pounded a fist into the palm of her hand before proudly declaring her plan.

"I've got it! All we need to do is freeze the fan solid. Then we can pass through the nasty blades unharmed."

Cirno looked excitedly at her friend, waiting with baited breath for the shower of praise and adoration that in her mind would surely accompany her masterful plan but instead Flandre just sniggered and said, "Freezing it. That's your answer to everything."

Cirno puffed up her cheeks and let out a disappointed breath. She clearly wasn't very happy and made sure that Flandre could see it.

"Humph, what would you do then? Blast it to pieces? That's your answer to everything!" Cirno shot back before she folded her arms smugly across her chest.

Flandre frowned and began to open her mouth to speak but stopped short.

*Damn it. I was just about to suggest blasting a hole through it. Good thing that I avoided her crafty trap.*

She glanced at Cirno, who was smiling at her rather unsettlingly and chastised herself for even thinking that the words Cirno and crafty could ever be uttered in the same sentence. The vampire's cheeks turned red with embarrassment so she turned away so that it wouldn't easily show. She looked up at the giant spinning fan while pouting up a storm.

"Anyway, why don't you try freezing it then?"

The rotating fan kept on spinning, blowing its cooling air throughout the castle as it had done so for centuries. It still produced the same monotonous sound as always but now an icy fairy walked up to its towering form while rubbing her sparkling hands together.

"Sorry, Mr Fan," she said as a ball of icy brilliance formed between her palms.

"But I need you to stay put for a moment."

The shining ball crackled and began to spin. Jagged ice shapes rose out of the sphere, disrupting its perfect shape. Cirno focused her eyes on the ball, her icy gaze filling it with chilling power. The shapes evened out. The ball became a bright shade of white as the icy constructs folded back into it until it was as smooth as an egg shell. Beams of white light shot out from between Cirno's hands and a strong wind current billowed outwards, trying to compete with the racing fan. Flandre placed a hand over her flapping hat, holding it in place lest it blow away.

"Right, take this Mr fan!" Cirno yelled as she arched back her hands and threw the sphere like a volleyball. It slammed into the centre of the fan with a messy pulping sound. The spinning blades tore it apart in seconds like an army of whirling daggers. Whatever the icy substance touched started to freeze immediately.

The large metal fan blades let out an ear splitting creak under the rapidly growing weight as a white skin of ice formed over them, covering its grey metal surface until it looked like an overgrown snowflake. The spinning slowed as the overworked motors strained to push the fan under this cold assault. Cirno surveyed her handiwork with a smug smile and turned back to a rather worried looking Flandre.

"How do you like my freezing sphere?" she asked. "Impressive, isn't it?"

The problem was that the fan hadn't stopped completely and was flinging the freezingly cold substance all over the room. The walls soon became coated with gooey, clear white crystals as the groaning fan, now acting like a giant multi-limbed catapult, launched its chilly cargo with the intensity of a real live blizzard.

Flandre shrieked and clasped her hands over her head before diving out of the way as one of the pale blobs narrowly missed her by a hair's breadth. Cirno looked around at the devastation she had unwittingly unleashed with a look of sheer bewilderment and took a few nervous steps backwards.

"Opps," she breathed before one of the smaller icy snowballs hit her squarely in the chest. She grunted as the wind was knocked out of her. Cirno fell to the ground next to a cowering Flandre who was trying her best to avoid the chaos. Cold blobs zoomed randomly overhead like an out of control snowball fight. The vampire was shielding her head fearfully and trying to anticipate if any of the flying objects would hit her.

"Was that supposed to happen?" shouted Flandre who was fighting to be heard over the increasingly tortured fan and the countless impacts as they plastered the walls and dropped the room into a total deep freeze. It looked like some warped version of danmaku; A pinball machine filled with an endless amount of white balls with two helpless girls stuck right in the middle of it all!

Cirno shook her head, her eyes starting to well up with tears. Both from the shock of being harshly knocked down and the fact that her plan had backfired spectacularly like always. She sniffed, fighting down the urge to cry her little eyes out.

"It's not my fault! This wasn't supposed to happen! Why does everything have to go wrong all the time?"

Flandre held up a hand and blasted one of the balls that had been on a direct collision course with her. It exploded into a cloud of shimmering icy pellets. Some of them zipped towards Flandre and

hit her but she gritted her teeth and shrugged them off since they were far too small to cause any serious harm. A second one however had Cirno firmly set in its sights. With no time to spare, Flandre awkwardly lunged in front of her and yelled as she smacked it away with an almighty slap that echoed throughout the chamber. Her hand felt partially numb and tingled with frostbite but it was better than the alternative.

*Stupid fairy isn't even defending herself. I need to get us out of this death trap pronto!*

"Don't worry about that, Cirno," she shouted, turning back to the fairy. "We both need to get out of here right now!"

She was about to drag Cirno upright and forcibly pull her back down the shaft but something else caught her attention.

"Cirno! Look at your chest!"

"Huh?" asked a sobbing Cirno.

"Your chest!" repeated Flandre with much more urgency this time, pointing down at the frosty mass which was even now growing steadily across the front of Cirno's dress.

The hand that Cirno had been using to nurse her sore stomach had been completely engulfed and the freezing forest was rapidly multiplying up her forearm. Cirno tried to scratch her head but her arm wouldn't move. That's strange, she thought. As soon as the ice fairy looked down and saw what was happening, she crawled backwards in shock while screaming "Get it off, get it off!"

"Why are you looking at me, Cirno? Can't you deal with your own spells?"

Knocked out of her bout of self pity by the current crisis and Flandre's words, realization flashed across Cirno's face. She reached around with her remaining hand and placed it on top of the

advancing icicles. Her mouth uttered something soundlessly and immediately the ice mass stopped growing and started to flake away. She sighed in relief.

"Waa!" gasped Flandre. Those small, seemingly unimportant blobs that had hit her earlier were now growing across her scarlet dress much like it had done to Cirno. She flailed her arms and twisted her hips, trying to shake it off but it clung to her like a second frost-bound skin.

"Get off me, stupid ice! I'm not going to let you claim me! Cirno! Get this stuff off of me!"

Cirno rushed over to her, taking care to dodge any incoming hostile objects. The small space had been plunged into a loud, raging firefight with danger criss-crossing in every conceivable direction.

"I'm sorry Flandre. I didn't know this would happen. I was just trying-"

Her speech was interrupted by a terrible groaning sound as straining metal screeched against crumbling stone. It sounded like rusty nails being dragged over a chalk board. The supports holding the fan in place had become weakened under the relentless freezing assault. The metal structure was beginning to work itself free, the spinning blades rocking the colossal propeller inside its holdings.

All this was accompanied by the tune of twisting steel. Flandre's eyes widened with horror when she saw the danger and acted instantly. Cirno was reaching down to dispel the ice that was still growing unchecked across her body but her worried friend simply didn't have the luxury of time. She grabbed Cirno's arm and pulled her towards the nearest wall, yelling at her that they needed to leave right now!

Moving was tough with the icy mass impeding her movement as it attempted to devour her entirely but Flandre willed her stiff limbs into action. This was no time to be taking a break.



"Let me heal you," urged Cirno who hadn't quite grasped the situation yet.

"Climb onto my back!" Flandre ordered. "The fans coming loose and we need to get out of here before we get chopped up into pieces!"

Cirno gulped and followed the vampires instructions, thinking better of questioning her this time. She mounted her friends back, grabbing onto her crystal wingtips for support. Flandre winced at the cold touch on one of her most delicate areas. With a final tortured shriek the fan shook loose of its support and came barrelling towards the panicked duo as they fled towards the wall.

Its spinning form sliced into the stone chamber as it crashed forwards, sending flakes of stone ricocheting dangerously across the cramped expanse. It seemed utterly unstoppable in its rampage and Cirno tightened her grip on Flandre's sensitive wing tips, urging her to hurry up. Flandre forced her sluggish legs to move as the icicles worked their way incessantly across her frame.

The floor had grown slick with ice and Flandre almost slipped over a few times but finally reached the wall in what felt like an eternity of running. Behind her, the fan continued it's whirlwind of destruction but Flandre didn't look back. She didn't slow down one bit as she had been building up power in her outstretched hands. The volatile yellow lighting crackled with fierce, unbridled power. She yelled as her body hit the wall square on, her hands touching it moments before colliding into it head first.

There was an almighty explosion of unimaginable yellow luminescence as the wall blocking their way was shattered like it was made of nothing more than tissue paper. Large stone bricks and chocking dust were blasted out onto the other side as Flandre ran for her very life through the newly formed hole with her icy cargo clinging tightly on her back.

Not far behind her, the spinning fan smashed into the chamber wall with enough force to shake this section of the castle to its very

foundations. Flandre stumbled but remained upright. She coughed on the thick dust cloud that had followed her escape out into the castle proper.

Cirno hopped off her companions back, much to the relief of Flandre's wings. Shielding her mouth with one hand, she realized that they had busted themselves into a vast kitchen. The icy fairy could smell something cooking. Something tasty. Soot flew up into her nostrils as she took another tantalizing whiff.

"Whyaa!" she cried as she staggered back a step. The dust cloud was starting to fade away as smaller fans mounted into the ceiling started to suck up the foul mixture. Lamps were mounted on the walls that trapped bright burning fires inside their glass containers that provided reassuring lighting. It was certainly better than the pitch darkness and claustrophobic feeling of the dank air duct.

"Is the castle coming down on us?" came a voice from somewhere in the kitchen. Pots and pans littered the flooring. One of the fan blades protruded from the wall had stabbed itself into the remains of what had once been a cooker. Now it was just a mangled wreckage with bubbling scrambled egg strewn across its surface.

"Will we be all right?" came another. This one a feminine, soft spoken tone.

"Is this one of master Sevar's experiments?"

"Hush. Don't mention the master's name like that. You know what happened to the last person to do that without thinking." Someone else coughed heavily. "We s-should (Cough) report this to head maid Yumeko."

"Who's there?" asked Cirno. Flandre tried to hush her but was too late.

*That fairy. Doesn't she realize that everyone in this castle is a potential enemy? Still, I wish she would hurry up and do something*

*about this spell.*

The ice was still growing with cold determination. It had nearly reached her neck. Soon she would be little more than an ice statue just like the guard that they had encountered earlier.

"Hey, Cirno! Get this annoying ice off me!" yelled Flandre who had finally lost her patience. A tall looking Youkai with bird like wings came into view behind a set of smoking stone ovens. She was wearing a cooking apron and flashed the two newcomers with a puzzled stare. Flandre hissed at her, bearing her fangs in a threatening gesture.

"Who is it?" came a voice from behind the winged chief.

"Looks like a vampire and a fairy," she answered back hesitantly. "They look kinda dangerous," she added.

The rather worried looking chief was clutching a long metal stewing spoon closely to her chest. As if it would protect her from all the dangers of the world. Flandre could see the panicked look on her face. The glistening sweat forming around her neck and the uncertainty in her stance. Not really in the mood to explain anything, Flandre picked out several kitchen implements scattered around the vast working area and made a big show of destroying them.

A frying pan creaked and folded in on itself as it was superheated far beyond anything it could handle. A holder containing a set of knives suddenly blew up in a shower of woodchips, the knives mimicking one of Sakuya's spell cards as the many sharp implements flew up and impaled the ceiling. A large black cooking pot was split into two parts as something unseen cut it squarely down the middle.

And lastly, Flandre screamed "Get out of here if you value your lives!" in her most menacing tone while lighting her eyes with a fiery scarlet tint.

That was more than the kitchen workers had signed on for that they fled away from this savage avatar of doom as fast as their legs could carry them. Some of them screaming while others held hands over their heads as if that simple act would save them. Even Cirno jumped back a step, having had no friendly warning whatsoever. The makeshift weapon that had been the stewing spoon clattered to the ground, the only remaining testament that there had ever been anyone else there.

Silence reigned across the vast expanse of the kitchen besides the gentle hissing of a cooking pot. Flandre sighed and collapsed into a nearby wooden chair. The ice had nearly covered her entire chest by this point and simply standing up required a lot of stamina. Cirno clutched her chest, trying to rest her beating heart.

"G-give me s-some warning, next time pleasshe," she stuttered, breathing raggedly. Her six arctic wings moved up and down frantically as her tiny mouth sucked in huge lungfuls of air.

Flandre rested her aching limbs on the chair's arm rest. One of her fingers tapped on the wooden frame impatiently. Her lips were pursed tightly together and a low mumbling sound was coming out of her mouth. Finally she snapped, giving Cirno the treatment that her fairy maids usually received.

"When are you planning on getting this stupid icy rubbish off of me? I've been turning into a snowman for ages now!" She started kicking the chair with the heels of her shoes. "Get this off me! RIGHT. NOW!"

"All right, fine. Don't blow your top."

Cirno hopped over a table and quickly wondered over. Flandre was still in the middle of her childish tantrum with all four limbs flailing around maniacally like she was trying to swat a buzzing fly with her eyes closed. She was still moaning to herself about the encroaching ice and with good reason considering that she had lost the feeling in several of her extremities.

Cirno started to emit a shimmering aqua coloured aura from her right hand. It hummed faintly, sounding like the soothing waves of the ocean. Not that Flandre would have noticed. One of her hands blindly smacked away Cirno's. The brilliant blue sphere that had been forming swirled around and disappeared from existence with a wet pop.

"Well I can't help you if you're like this," chided Cirno.

"Stop flailing around or I'll just end up making it worse! Come on, stop being such a baby!"

Flandre stopped squirming.

*A baby? I'm not a baby! Who wouldn't be angry in this situation!*

Hot blood rushed to her head as Flandre opened her eyes but once she looked into Cirno's pale blue gaze, her anger subsided and she realized that she had been making a fool of herself. She shrugged.

"Humph, do whatever you want."

Cirno frowned but said nothing and went to work. It didn't take long for her healing aura to remove the white pulp that had been plaguing Flandre up until this point. The vampire sighed with relief and stretched freely now that her icy chains had been removed. Still, she missed the soothing sound of the sea. It had been so long since she had witnessed such an endless, blue horizon.

"Ahhh. That's so much better," said Flandre who rotated her sore elbows to make sure that they were still in good, working order.

Flandre gasped when she noticed that where the ice had formed over her pale, beautiful white skin, it had become slightly inflamed and reddened.

"Hey fairy! Look at what you did to my youthful skin!" she growled, pointing downwards at the affected areas. "This better not be

permanent or so help me."

There was no answer.

"Hey? Where are you?" Flandre could hear a faint munching sound. Like a mouse eating some cheese in the dark. She grinned for a moment, remembering fond memories of hunting mice around the mansion while imagining the fairy as a hairy, mischievous rodent but quickly resumed her investigation. She peered around a series of large shelves containing various spices and came across Cirno stuffing her face with a piece of cherry pie.

Cirno looked over her shoulder and waved her over, licking her lips. "Come over here. There's pie and it's really tasty!"

It must have been as fragments of it were all over her face as she gleefully continued to stuff as much of the pie as she could manage right into her mouth.

*She looks like me when I feed. Blood everywhere.*

"Hey, Cirno. Why are you eating something from this kitchen? They could have poisoned it! Are you always this careless?"

Cirno waved dismissively and laughed while spitting out more food than she was eating.

"Don't be silly, Flandre. If they poisoned it then how could they eat the delicious cake themselves?"

*Suit yourself. That's an apple pie, anyway. Haven't you ever heard of snow white?*

Flandre wondered over and looked at the pie skeptically. She peered closer, scrutinizing it from every angle.

"What's wrong?" asked Cirno as she hungrily reached down and picked up another slice. "Aren't you hungry?"

Not really, thought Flandre.

Vampires could happily survive solely on blood if they needed to.

*And what's wrong with that? It was after all the most delicious thing in the world. Still, sister always said that variety was the spice of life.*

Flandre reached down and picked up a piece. The fairy didn't seem to be showing any adverse affects so Flandre hesitantly took a bite.

*Like my personal food taster, heh.*

She immediately spat it out like it was indeed deadly poison.

"Urgh! This pie is stone cold!"

Cirno nodded as she happily finished her third slice while trying to talk with her mouth full. "It's basth whann it's coad."

*I can't believe I listened to her. I need a glass of water to wash this horrid taste out of my mouth.*

She glared darkly at Cirno and wondered if the fairy had done that on purpose but judging from her stupidly blissful expression, Flandre somehow doubted it. She grumbled and walked over to the kitchen sink and then paused as a more pleasing option occurred to her. Flandre reached into her bag before producing her beloved bottle of blood. She gave it a gentle shake, enjoying the way the life giving red liquid swished around inside.

Blood is thicker than water after all, she thought, grinning. She unscrewed the top and drank down a healthy dose. While looking down the length of the bottle, she considered teasing the fairy for some much deserved revenge.

*Maybe Cirno might like to unwittingly try some delicious blood pie?*

The floor shook as heavy footsteps announced the presence of someone or something large approaching. Flandre watched as a pair

of meaty fingers grabbed the stone archway that lead outside the kitchen. Then its owner entered the chamber, having to duck under the archway to fit its vast bulk inside. It was a huge hulking orge wearing leather armour and was covered in thick, orange fur. It raised its impressively massive looking spiked mace which was longer than Flandre's entire body length. It spotted the vampire finishing her refreshing drink and snorted in contempt.

"This is it?" he spat in a booming voice before hefting the mace above his head in a two handed grip. Flandre glanced at him and casually raised a finger, not even bothering to take the bottle away from her lips. A minute, burning fireball formed on her fingertip before she willed it to travel across the air.

It split into four smaller balls and struck the orge at four different points. Its orange fur caught fire instantly and turned the orge into a living candle. It ran out of the kitchen screaming for water, smashing the top of the archway with its dense head on the way out. Well, that's takes care of that, she thought, waving the smoke away from her fingertip like a cowboy.

Flandre rejoined Cirno who had finally grown tired of the pie after consuming more than half of it and instead was rummaging through the contents of a nearby stock cupboard. Only the fairy's rear end and icy wings could be seen as she clattered and banged her way through whatever she didn't deem interesting.

"Did something happen? she asked. "I heard something."

"Nothing to worry yourself about but we'd better make a move. It's getting hotter around here by the second."

Cirno stopped her plundering just long enough to pop her head around the cupboard's door. "Hey, Flandre, we need some disguises, or at least a change of clothing. We're both filthy!"

"Well, that's true I guess. Wait, what did you mean by disguises?"



"Yeah, come over here and have a look-see."

Inside, hung on a rack behind the many wooden boxes of fruit and vegetables were several plain looking maid uniforms.

# Masquerade

Tap tap tap went the uncomfortable black shoes as the two maids walked down the hallway floor. The sound mimicked a large old grandfather clock which stood silently against a wall. These were not your typical maids however, but maids in disguise. Cirno and Flandre had donned the maid outfits under their regular clothing in order to pass unhindered within the castle which seemed to be one giant death trap filled with countless minions seeking out their death. Flandre liked the constant state of danger but was growing tired of trouncing faceless no name monsters and guards. Where was the challenge in that? Well, I guess its my fault for being too powerful she thought to herself as she stared at a silver tea pot as it balanced on the tray she was currently carrying. She had taken it to help compliment her masterful disguise but once again there was no reflection to greet her on the gleaming surface of the polished metal tray.

Cirno tugged at her hem of her dress. She was squirming like the maid outfit had been laced with some kind of itching powder. None of the uniforms had been in their size back at the kitchen and the shoes they now found themselves wearing were cheaply made things that were the most ill-fitting footwear Flandre had ever worn. "Hey Cirno," she said with a hushed voice. "Stop fidgeting or you'll blow our cover."

"But these clothes are clinging to me and they stink of flour!" Cirno protested as she impatiently tugged at the collar like it was throttling her. Flandre frowned. "Hey Cirno, if anyone should be complaining here its me. I'm the one who has to bend my wings backwards in order to wear this drab baggy fairy uniform." Back in the kitchen Cirno had just allowed her wings to melt away under the steamy heat from one of the many boiling pots with only a mild discomfort to show for it. It had taken a lungful of persuasion to accomplish that little errand and had cost her an endless string of complaining after the fact. What was the problem? She could always regrow them unlike

her own delicate wings. In order to fit her sharp wing-tips under the fairy uniform required a great deal of willpower. It was very uncomfortable to fold her wings so closely behind her back and hold them down tightly enough so that they wouldn't rip any fabric. She had to fight the constant urge to just let her poor constrained wings tear themselves out of their stuffy cocoon.

"What do you mean by fairy uniform?" asked Cirno with an arched eyebrow. "I didn't see a single fairy working in that kitchen."

"All the maids in my sisters mansion are fairies. I just figured that maid work was more suited to fairies, that's all."

Cirno looked like she had been slapped across the face. "Hey, just because all the maids where you live are fairies doesn't mean that's all we can do." She flashed Flandre an accusing stare complete with a prodding finger. "Fairies can do all sorts of things, not just maid work."

"Oh yeah? What other jobs can they do?" asked Flandre, trying not to sound so superior but betrayed by her wide toothed grin.

Cirno fidgeted with her collar once again and readjusted the maids headdress on top of her blue head of hair which had become dislodged with her sudden outburst. Flandre thanked herself for that fact that she had chosen to hold the tea set and not her easily excitable friend. Flandre could see that Cirno's little brow was furrowed in deep thought. Poor little thing must be struggling to come up with an answer she thought as she saw the way the fairy was looking down at her shoes. Finally she piped up with an obviously uncertain response.

"Well, I know a few fairies act as guides for people looking to pass through the fairy forest a-and..." she paused for a moment, fumbling for words. "Some fairies like to wonder around looking for items. Yeah, that's it! Treasure hunters! Yeah. Fairies are great treasure hunters!"

Flandre shook her head. "Treasure hunting isn't a job."

"Is so, is so!" retorted Cirno, repeatedly stabbing her hand at Flandre in a tantrum. Her sabre trusting index finger brushed against one of the white china tea cups on Flandre's tray. The tea cup wobbled on the plate underneath it like jelly. "Argh. Calm down you silly fairy! You're going to knock this tea set all over the place," she said as she desperately tried to hold the rapidly shifting collection of silver and china items steady and stop them from resembling a series of castle towers in the grips of a particularly bad earthquake. Cirno was still acting like a uncontrollable blizzard that could not be tamed. One of the pinkish biscuits slipped off the tray before falling to the floor. Sheesh. What a trouble maker.

"Look Cirno," Flandre said while trying to hold the wobbling tea set out of reach of the flailing blue menace. "If I was the head of a household. I'd hire you to be my maid ok? So stop acting mental!"

Cirno puffed up her chest and exhaled sharply. "Who says I want to be a maid!" By this point Flandre was beginning to get annoyed but before she lost all her patience, her ears pricked up at the rhythmic sound of boots on stone. "Hey," Flandre snapped. "People are approaching. Quieten down and act just like a maid would do." Cirno calmed down enough when she too heard the footsteps and transformed herself from a bratty fairy into a perfectly unremarkable background image. In other words how a maid should ideally present herself. Flandre smirked and added, "See, I knew being a maid would come naturally to you." Cirno just looked at her darkly and stuck her tongue out.

Two figures came into view. Judging from the uninspiring chain mail and leather attire they were grabbed in the two must be guards. One was human while the other was taller and stockier and covered with green scales. Flandre's keen eyes noticed the glint of silver around their scabbards. Did they possess the same silver swords that Yumeko used? The human greeted them with a wave of the hand and asked them where they were heading. The dragonman's fork shaped tongue slithered out from between its jagged looking teeth. It

whipped around, tasting the air as its beady little yellow eyes regarded the two maids with some emotion that Flandre couldn't identify. Cirno and Flandre looked at each other, perhaps each expecting the other to come up with a convincing answer. The vampire's mind raced for a likely location that could be found within a castle. Tower? Guest wing? Dining room? That last one sounded pretty good but what if they were going the wrong way.

"We're heading to the main hall," said Cirno. The lizard guard scratched his chin with one large outstretched black nail and looked at his human opposite. He shrugged and after some hushed conferring waved them on. "Watch yourselves young ladies. There are intruders afoot within the castle," said the human looking soldier. The girls nodded as one. "We'll be careful," said Flandre with just the right hint of shyness that her fairy maids usually displayed. When the guards had moved safely outside of earshot, Cirno couldn't contain herself any longer. "That was so cool. We totally fooled those stupid guards. They'd kick themselves in the head if they realized who we were!"

Flandre nodded, picking up one of the chocolate looking biscuits and twirling thoughtfully between her slender fingers. "Maybe they knew who we were after all." Cirno blinked uncertainly. "What do you mean, Flandre?" The vampire grinned. "Maybe they just didn't want to mess with us. They must have heard that we fought that arrogant maid to a standstill by now. Well, I did anyway."

Cirno puffed up her little chest and frowned. "Hey, I helped as well. They better be scared of me as well!" Flandre giggled and began to lift the biscuit up to her waiting lips. "I'm sure they were quaking in their boots at the thought of running into a pint sized fairy."

The delicious looking biscuit was about to enter Flandre's gaping mouth when a pale white hand slashed out from beside her. Cirno grabbed at the brown treat but Flandre's all seeing eyes, honed from countless practice with avoiding fast moving objects saw her coming and she casually lifted it just out of reach. "What are you playing at

fairy? This is my biscuit. If you wanted your own, you should have taken one from the kitchen."

The fairy maid looked at Flandre with a mixture of frustration and annoyance. Her cheeks were all puffed up with a rosy red sheen to them. She stamped the floor with one small black shoe. "Don't call me pint sized. I'm almost as tall as you are. You're just a walking christmas tree." Then she finished it off by sticking her tongue out at Flandre. The younger scarlet sister gasped slightly, her mouth curling up into a mean looking snarl. "You better not be insulting my elegant wings. My maids always compliment me on my dazzlingly stunning wings." This time it was Flandre who stuck her tongue out while leaning over Cirno to hi-light the very small advantage she held in high. "I bet your just jealous that I have such unique wings. All you have is plain looking shards of ice." Flandre shrugged. "I guess you don't even have those anymore."

The little fairy immediately flew into a childish tantrum. "Shut up porcupine back!" she whined and grabbed at the tray that Flandre had cradled with such care down the hallway. A storm of grabbing hands assaulted the tray. Attempting to raid Flandre's treasure trove of confectionery treats. Flandre dodged left and right, holding the tray with both hands. With great difficulty she was keeping the raging fairy at bay while the plates full of biscuits and delicate silverware set upon it wobbled and shook like they were in the grips of a monumental earthquake. "Cut it out fairy!" Flandre spat as she struggled to hold the tray out of harms reach. She felt like an travelling acrobat expertly holding a priceless heirloom while some idiot threw knives at her. Cirno was full of unbridled juvenile energy and never one relented in her storm of flailing body parts, all the while complaining about the way she was treated. The fairy's hand locked around one of the straps fastening the apron to Flandre's chest and pulled with all her might, causing the vampire to stagger and almost drop the tray. "Don't be such a baby!" snapped Flandre as she clamped a hand around Cirno's forehead just above her bright blue hair and tried to shove her away without hurting her. A single biscuit toppled onto the floor and was immediately crushed

underfoot as the two grappling competitors pushed and shoved, whined and moaned at each other. Locked together in a childish school yard contest.

"What do you think you two are up to?" came a domineering voice that echoed down the hallway. The two swabbing ruffians stopped cold as the unfamiliar voice washed over them like a cold shower. They looked at each other, panting heavily. Both wore stupefied expressions. Now that the momentary madness had left them they wondered why they had their hands wrapped each other. They broke away as the very regal voice repeated "What do you two think you are up two." The voices owner walked towards them, flanked by old looking paintings either side of her. She was a human looking maid with fading blond hair tied behind her back and wore a pair of old fashioned spectacles. The poor lady looked worried and was clutching the area around her heart. Sweat was beading down her cheeks. She eyed the tray Flandre was holding and sighed. "Its quite about time you showed up. The princess has been threatening to send us all down to the dungeon thanks to the delays in the kitchen. I've been trying my best to console her but its quite fruitless." She paused, perhaps realizing that she was only adding to the delay. "Don't just stand there, follow me." She beckoned for them to follow as she started to move back down the hallway.

Flandre wondered what they should do. It was a simple choice. Run away or follow her? She felt the faintest bump as something lightly brushed against the tray while she was working through her little conundrum. That's odd. The bump was follow by the sound of munching. She turned to see that Cirno had swiped a biscuit and stuffed the entire thing inside her mouth. The icy fairy looked up at her innocently and baby eyed. "What's wrong?" she asked as if that fact wasn't obvious from all the chocolate smeared around her lips and the betraying bulge moving around underneath her cheek. Flandre growled and balled her free hand into a fist. "Hurry up and follow me this instant," said the blond maid with more force packed behind it this time. "I don't know what's going on with you two but you better cut it out sharpish. You're just lucky that I'm not Yumeko

otherwise your lovely heads might decorate the castle gate this splendid evening. I'm not above telling on you if you don't cut out that behaviour immediately!"

That took the wind out of Flandre's sails a little. She had flash backs to the many Sakuya lectures she'd had to endure over the years. Oh you broke that. Don't sneak into the garden and so on. She decided to follow the maid for now and made the rebellious little Cirno follow her with a light bump on the head. Cirno scowled and stuck her tongue out but Flandre was rewarded with the pitter patter of the fairy's little shoes as she followed closely behind. She could hardly be angry at Cirno. She was after all a fairy and fairy act that way all the time. Usually, back at the mansion, she paid back those fairies that displeased her with pranks. She smirked at the many things she could trick Cirno into tasting but she'd have plenty of time for that later. Right now she followed, playing the part of the modest maid.

They moved down the seemingly endless corridor, ignoring the countless doors and passageways that invited further investigation. Instead they focused on their mission to deliver this tray to the princess. Well, Flandre did anyway. Cirno had tried to wonder off down a side passage where the appealing sound of music could be heard. A harp if Flandre's ears were not mistaken and they rarely were. It acted like a sirens song which lured the hapless fairy away so Flandre grabbed her by the collar before the old maid noticed. "I was going to come back," she started.

"Shhhhhhhhhh," hushed Flandre, holding a finger up to her scarlet lips. This fairy seemed totally incapable of walking in silence. Like she was a ball of pure energy that would not be contained. She decided to take a different approach then simply smacking her across the head, which is what her gut was telling her to do. "I understand sneaking must be tough for a fairy. Just do as I do ok?" Cirno huffed up in her usual outraged manner. "Its not tough. I can do anything I want!" Flandre nodded sarcastically. "Fine, then show me. First one to be discovered loses? Got it?" She smiled slightly to make it seem like a friendly challenge and not a gambit to keep the



ice fairy from going nuclear. Cirno grinned then nodded before straightening her frilly head dress. "I won't lose," muttered the fairy.

The three maids travelled down the corridor at a brisk walk. During this time they passed by many tasteless paintings arranged in rows along the walls. Flandre played a little mental game to pass the time. She counted how many times the successive picture would end up more ugly then the one preceding it. Her highest count was nine. There were a lot of old portraits of inbred looking nobles so that helped push the count up. Flandre wondered if these were the relatives of the current master? If so, they lacked all the grace and charm that a refined master should possess. Nothing at all like sister. Cirno hadn't made a peep since their little talk. Maybe she had some fairy maid blood in her after all.

Finally the spectacled maid halted in front of a set of blue double doors that stretched right up to the ceiling. Black, jagged spikes stuck out at random all along the doors dull blue surface. More for some sense of morbid decoration then protection, guessed Flandre. The blond maid adjusted her glasses and placed her hands on a set of brass handles shaped like dragon maws. As she began to push them open she said over her shoulder "Remember, don't do anything to anger the princess." The doors creaked slowly open as the hinges groaned under the immense weight, revealing a vast dining hall complete with hanging torches and a long rectangular dining table that dominated the centre of the cavernous room. Flandre quickly walked onto a richly decorated regal blue carpet with gold trimmings that surrounded the table on all sides like some kind of road. Various grand tapestries depicting great battles were hung from the walls.

Each one followed the same series of events and told an epic tale as you travelled around the table. The blond maid hurried along it while holding up the hem of her skirt, ignoring the artists commendable efforts. Flandre followed with Cirno close behind. Cirno gasped at the sight of countless bowls of food, fruit and drink arranged near the end of the table that could have easily seated upwards of sixty people. The fairy had likely never seen such a excessive feast. Only

one of the seats was currently occupied. The chair right at the head of the table which commanded a nice view of the many mouthwatering meats and wines arranged solely for its use.

Cirno's nostrils sniffed at the delectable banquet longingly and her cool blue eyes seemed glued to a tasty looking cooked duck lavished with gravy which was situated just on the edge of the table. She pulled her gaze painfully away as she passed it, her hands clenching at her sides. "Its about time," came a haughty voice, accompanied by the shattering of a wine glass as it was thrown against the floor. The owner of the voice sat at the head of the table with several maids arranged besides her to attend to her every whim. One of them held a interwoven fan made up of blades of luscious looking grass. "Fan faster," snapped the same voice. The blond maid flinched visibly ahead of Flandre and quickened her pace, walking up to stand besides the so called princess before bowing obediently. If she bent down any further she would snap in two, thought Flandre.

The princess slammed a plump fist against the table, causing the silver cutlery to scatter in the same manner as the surrounding maids. The princess was well fed and filled out her pristinely white ball gown dress which was a few sizes too small for her impressive figure. She had a round looking face with shiny, beauty cream covered skin and long blond hair braided into a long pony tail. It too was fading just like the maid that had guided them and showed clear signs of faking colouring products. "Its about time you arrived, Melanor," she said in her self important tone, eyeing the blond maid coldly. "Now, come come. Lets have my tea before my dinner grows cold."

Melanor curtsied politely and waved Flandre forwards. The vampire blinked in surprise but masked her emotion quickly enough and stepped forwards. The fat princess wants tea huh? She might have been beautiful once but years of easy living had clearly taken their toll. Or that was Flandre's theory at least. She enjoyed a carefree life back at the scarlet mansion but would never allow herself to fall into

such a state. "What are you looking at?" asked the princess, frowning. Flandre realized she had been spacing out and quickly averted her gaze while reaching for one of the cups displayed on her tray. "What are you doing?" spat the princess. "Don't use those filthy things. Use my personal bluewater cup." The princess indicated a cream coloured china cup festooned with sea blue thorns complete with nasty looking barbs. They criss crossed across its sheer surface. Flandre reached down for the cup. "No, no, foolish maid," snapped miss high and mighty. "You pore the tea into the cup. I'll not have you smudge my beautiful cup with your common hands," she corrected with a self important tone. The edge of Flandre's mouth flinched with anger but she fought down the urge to do something drastic.

Meanwhile Melanor had handed Cirno a set of high class silver dinning cutlery wrapped in a silk purple cloth. Cirno looked down at the bag of metal, tossing it around in her palms. Clueless as to its real purpose. Melanor pointed at the table and whispered that she was to set the dinning wear up in the correct fashion. Cirno's face flashed with realization and she hurried over to where the princess was still berating Flandre in her efforts to pour coffee and serve her with biscuits. Cirno flashed Flandre a grin, amused at the vampires hardships. Flandre in turn narrowed her eyes at the icy fairy as she filled the bluewater cup with fresh coffee. Think I'll lose to you, fairy? Not likely. Cirno dropped the cluster of knives, forks and spoons onto the table with a loud clang. The princess flinched, as did the maids. She looked Cirno with a scornful look. "Can you keep it down? We're not trying to wake the dead here child. Melanor! Where did you find these two? A mental institution? I thought I told you, no more simpletons!"

This woman was possibly the rudest and most spoiled brat Flandre had even had the misfortune to come across. How she commanded any respect in this dump was a mystery in itself. Look at her. A fat, lazy self centred worthless lump of flesh. She had no right to order her to do anything. Cirno shifted through the collection of cutlery, looking more than a little lost. There were many shapes and different

types of silverware. Countless spoons of all sizes. Some of the folks were of strange design, some much longer than the others. The icy fairy's gaze lingered on a strange two pronged fork for a moment before gliding across the silver forest aimlessly. Finally, she picked a knife up at random and placed it heads down above the princess' plate. Her mouth formed into a proud smile. The kind one might make if they solved a particularly difficult maths problem. Melanor cleared her throat. The maid holding the fan gasped, blinking with astonishment. "That's not the correct way," said Melanor. "You need to place the cutting knife first. Then you must-" She stopped talking as the princess yawned and waved a hand dismissively.

"Don't waste your breath with that doltish clown. She seems entirely clueless. You!" she said, indicating one of the maids at her side. "Take over this monumental task, would you?" The maid bowed and hurried to obey, practically shoving Cirno aside as she did so. Flandre looked on with an increasing sense of frustration. She couldn't stand this bluebloods temperament. It had sucked all the little fun she had gotten from dressing up and acting like a maid. She'd be happy if she never had to wear a maids uniform as long as she lived. Time to end little charade in style. Flandre had situated herself along with the other maids just to the side of the princess so that no one noticed her mean spirited grin. She glanced briefly at her exposed neck. Flandre could sense the high concentration of blood flowing through her veins. Her heart started to thump in her chest but she pushed the thoughts aside and out of her mind. She had other plans.

Cirno just stood rooted to the spot like a fish out of water as the other maids worked tirelessly to set everything up to the unreasonably high standards required of them. The princess shook her head, and glared viciously at the unfortunate fairy. "I know someone who will be entertaining the dungeon keeper tonight." She glanced at Flandre like the vampire was something that she had scraped off her shoe. "But fear not. You can have your friend for company." Flandre smiled back unsettlingly, masking her cruel intentions with practised ease. Meanwhile, Cirno's cheeks started to redden and her brow

creased up but the melting pot that was her anger didn't boil over the surface in this instance. She must be pretty determined not to lose the challenge.

The princess snorted and lifted her precious bluewater cup. "You won't be smiling by this time tonight." Oh, but I think I will, thought Flandre. Lets start with something simple. When the attention had left her, she casually lifted her hand to scratch at her nose but that was not her true intention. She pointed at the brownish liquid coffee and focused a small but powerful beam of heat at it. The coffee started to boil as it was superheated within the span of a second. The princess took a tentative sip. The effect was immediate. She screamed and shot out of her seat. The cup left her hands and shattered on the floor in a storm of broken china. "Whahhhtt's thhe mearning of thdis?" she slurred, her tongue hanging out, gasping for air. The maids panicked at there masters misfortune. Everyone but Cirno who, from her vantage point had been the only one to have seen the true culprit. Flandre winked in her direction. "Water, Melanor. Waoter!" The maid hurried frantically to comply. She grasped a rather expensive wine bottle which was the only liquid on offer at the banquet table. Melanor popped the cork and quickly rose the bottle to the princess' tortured lips. However, right at the moment of possible relief as the first drops of nourishing wine flowed out of the bottle, its long glass neck inexplicably shot off from the body with a loud crack.

A veritable torrent of wine spilled forth from the beheaded bottle and strong smelling purple grape juice poured into her mouth and down her chest, staining her beautiful white gown. She gurgled and choked as Melanor unwittingly poured the stream of wine right down her throat. The sounds that echoed around the hall sounded like someone drowning at dry land. "Ahhhhhhhhh!" the princess shrieked, swatting the wine bottle away. She gasped and breathed heavily for a moment. "What are you playing at?," she shouted at Melanor. The poor maid shook visibly with fear and took an uncertain step backwards from her raging master. Flandre was still grinning widely, thoroughly enjoying herself. The princess shook her head

and began to sit down. Instinctively, Flandre grasped the chair with both hands and violently yanked the seat out from underneath her. The chair flew backwards, scattering a few of the attending maids like panicked birds, before crashing into the wall. The princess yelped as she collapsed onto the floor in a pathetic heap, falling heads over heels in a rather undignified display of clumsiness.

"Ouch," the princess moaned as Melanor and a black haired maid helped the weary lady to her feet. "I saw you!" said one of the maids, pointing at Flandre with an accusing finger. "It was the newcomer, my lady. She pushed the chair out from under you!" The princess rubbed her bottom and winced before locking the mischievous smirking vampire with a look of pure blazing hatred. "You little bitch. I'll have the flesh whipped from your back for this... this insult!" she shouted, shacking the wine glasses with the force of her words. She turned to the maids. "Seize her!"

Flandre threw her head back and laughed like a manic, her arms outstretch either side of her. Long sharp talons extended themselves from her finger tips. Her two front fangs, the mark of a true vampire, became noticeable and made her laughing face all the more frightening. There was the sound of tearing fabric as brilliant multicoloured wings sprouted from her back like a butterfly. The bright shimmering colours created a dazzling display and backlit the horrifying image of Flandre as she turned her gaze upon the terror-stricken onlookers. "Seize me?" she said, her every word dripping with harmful intent. "What a funny notion. I've grown tired of this masquerade." She rose her voice and opened her mouth. "Its time for me to feed!"

Everyone screamed wide eyed with pure terror, their hysterical fear driving them to drive for the exit. They formed a stampede, pushing and shoving each other in their efforts to escape from the nightmare that stood laughing maniacally behind them. The princess was pushed aside in the press of bodies, the maids no longer caring about there uncaring mistress. The ever present threat that one of them could be pulled back at any second festered in the back of their

minds. They ran yelling at the top of their lungs, totally possessed with a heart crushing sense of panic that clouded their minds and reduced them to that one primal instinct. The desire to survive. Cirno found herself at the rear of the pack, running as fast as her little legs would carry her but it just wasn't fast enough. A firm hand clamped itself tightly around her arm and she struggled to break against it. "No, don't eat me," she whimpered.

"Stop struggling," said Flandre. "I wasn't serious. I was just having fun with those tightly wound bluebloods. Come on! Stop struggling already." It took a little while for Flandre's words to sink in the fairy's panicked stricken brain but eventually she looked the vampire in the eyes and saw the look of sincerity on her face. She calmed down gradually, her rapid breathing returning to a more normal rate. Flandre let her go and shrugged at her. "Why were you running? Did you think I would hurt you?"

Cirno shook her head. "No, I mean..it was a pretty convincing performance. I guess when everyone started running I thought you might have really snapped." Flandre grumbled at that omission. She didn't know if she should be offended that Cirno had been afraid of her or happy that her acting had been so well received. She took a deep breath and smiled light heartedly. "You don't have to worry about me. So stop acting silly." Cirno hesitated for a unsure moment then smiled back at her, seemingly relieved. Clap, clap, clap. The two smiles fell from their faces as they turned as one to the sound of someone clapping near the now open double doors. Claudette stood there, her expression jovial. She wore a sly grin as she applauded Flandre, though whether or not that was sincere or not was another question. "Bravo. Quite a show you pulled off there. I shouldn't have been so quick to write you two off. You've done a good job of surviving up until now."

Claudette looked practically the same since their last encounter outside the castle but with a few differences. She still was clad almost entirely in black but her outfit was torn in several places and her leg had a bandage wrapped around it with bloody splotches

scattered across it. Her backpack also seemed to be bulkier than before. Flandre tensed up, remembering Yumeko's words. The maid had every reason to lie to me but then again, I don't even know this woman either. "Claudette. I was wondering were you had disappeared to," replied Flandre. "Seems like you've run into a little trouble yourself." The brunette waved her leg around loosely, nodding. "It's a dangerous place around here. They don't very kindly to visitors it seems. Plus Yumeko wasn't in the best of moods when I ran into her. No thanks to your antics, I imagine."

"That horrible maid said you used us as bait." said Cirno, the quivering completely gone from her voice. Come right out and say it why don't you, thought Flandre. "She said you're a thief and that you use people." Claudette rose a hand to her mouth in mock astonishment. "I'm hurt that you could doubt me, little fairy. Don't believe everything you hear."

"It's true though, isn't it," asked Flandre, narrowing her eyes. There was no friendliness to her words. Might as well hear the truth now. "Yes it is," answered the thief, not even batting an eyelid. "A walking distraction is a useful thing to have in my line of business so when I saw you two blundering around in the darkness I knew a good opportunity was to be had." She noticed that Flandre's mood had darkened. Her teeth were clenched together tightly and her fists shook besides her with barely contained anger. Cirno pipped up in her usual manner, never one to be taken for a fool.

Claudette knocked on the door twice, smirking. "Two little fools. Think you can catch me?" Then she pushed herself away from the double doors and disappeared into the blackness of the castle. Flandre heard the rapid beating of footsteps and shot off after her, shouting out her name. Cirno hesitated for a moment, then followed, hot on her heels.



## Perilous Pursuit

Flandre raced after the illusive thief Claudette. The scarlet vampire resembled a vengeful, angry demon with deep glowing red eyes and razor sharp fangs. Her mouth was snarling with unrestrained anger and she left a path of destruction wherever she went. Solid looking wooden doors were smashed off their hinges like they weighed nothing at all. The contents of rooms were flung around with hurricane like force as the rampaging vampire zoomed through them. Chairs, clothes, beds and tables lay broken and scattered about randomly, often lying in pieces and resting at odd angles. Ceilings crumbled into ruin, raining down piano sized stones on the unwary. Some walls had partially collapsed. A series of large marble statues were flung with such force that they crashed into the castle wall and broke into many pieces, such was the pressure of Flandre's passing. It looked like the castle had been the victim of some cataclysmic earthquake. "Claudette!" she screamed, "you've made a big mistake!" Spittle flung from her lips as she made the passionate declaration of impending violence. "Get your traitorous ass back here and I might even let you live!" she promised, though she wasn't sure whether or not she was capable of keeping it. She pushed herself onward, sucking in huge lungfuls of air to fuel her pumping leg muscles. Her feet hit the floor so rapidly that friction burns were produced in the carpet as she ran, creating a trail of scorched fabric whenever she traveled down one of the castles many hallways.

Was it just her imagination or did she hear mocking laughter echoing down from just up ahead, around that corner? Teasing her from just out of her sight. Flandre snarled in frustration. For all the speed and dexterity her vampire body gave her she was unable to catch up to this annoying thief and that fact hurt her pride more than any jost ever could. Determined to change that fact, Flandre jumped ahead, landed and as her legs braced her high speed landing she crouched downwards and sprung herself forwards like a coiled spring. Her nimble hands grabbed the corner wall, her claws digging in to the solid stonework like it was mere butter before pulling herself around

the corner in a slingshot motion that increased her speed even further. Her expression changed into a gleefully mad smile as she anticipated the vengeance that she was about to inflict upon her unfortunate pray but as she sprung around the corner her mouth quivered with rage. The only faces that greeted her were the old withered expressions of dusty portraits hung along either side on the walls. Flandre growled loudly, the veins bulging on her forehead. "Come out and play!" she screamed. "Its no use running away from me! I'll find you wherever you sulk off to!"

Meanwhile Cirno was trying her best to keep up with the berserk vampire as she flew behind her, following the path of destruction that Flandre left in her wake. "Hey, wait up!" she called but received no answer. She pouted, annoyed that she was being ignored yet again and waved her arms furiously as if it would somehow increase her speed. Flying was dangerous in the tight confines of the castle. One wrong move and she would go splat right into a wall, turning into a chilly stain of snowy mush. She moaned, straining as she willed her spirit to somehow boost her power so that the rapidly fading multicoloured wings of Flandre wouldn't grow even more distant. Her own icy wings had started to regenerate but at the moment were still little stubs of ice and helped her little in her hazardous pursuit. Like newborn plant sprouts, they would eventually grow into six splendid clear blue wings unless she stopped and used her magic to hurry the process but then she would lose sight of her single minded friend. "If I had my wings, keeping up would be no problem," she mumbled.

Up ahead Flandre shouted some harsh words that Cirno didn't dare to repeat and then a section of the castle roofing came crashing down in a tumble of wood and stone. Flandre's speedy legs sprinted her past it without incident but Cirno flew head first right into the collapsing disaster area. "Whahhhh!" she wailed repeatedly as she ducked under a colossal wooden supporting beam as thick as a tree trunk that pulled down with it countless grey stones from the ceiling above. Cirno tilted her head up just in time to see the hailstorm of falling masonry and let out a panicked scream before her danmaku trained reflexes kicked in and she just about managed to twist her

body through the cascading collection of heavy bludgeoning objects. She sighed in relief and wondered if that had that been Flandre's handy work that had almost crushed her. Next she gulped as she realized that Flandre was no longer in sight though she could still hear destructive sounds of shattering glass and pulverizing brick which had almost become the vampires calling card. "Geez. Don't destroy the castle while we're still inside stupid!" shouted Cirno as she sped after her.

Flandre took huge leaps and bounds, covering half the span of the snakelike corridors with a single jump. Sweat was beading down her face. She hadn't had to work this hard at catching someone in a long time. She had flashbacks to when she would happily chase Meiling around in the mansions gardens. Meiling was always a good sport like that and always made time to play with her often at times troublesome little mistress. She was snapped back to reality when she sighted a blonde female mage in long red robes ahead, clutching a wooden staff. The mage, wide-eyed as she saw the vampire charging towards her like some monstrous apparition out of the night, came to a stop and began fervently chanting a spell. Fiery embers began to appear, circling the staffs head. "Get out of my way," yelled Flandre as she landed, her shoes cracking the castle flooring. Without even taking a breath she crouched down and launched herself upwards in the latest in a string of mighty jumps. The mage had just enough time to yelp before Flandre landed atop of her shoulders. The mage looked up, terrified that Flandre's gaping fangs were about to plunge into the soft flesh of her neck but instead the vampire simply used her as a two legged stepping stone. The force of the powerful jump slapped her downwards with the force of a tunderclap. "Ahwoahwhoh," the mage screamed as she rolled across the floor in a heap like a skipping stone across water.

Her glowing red staff fell from her grip. The magical embers touched the carpet and bust into flames, turning the hallway into a vision from hell. Burning cinders spread the fire onto the hanging decorations and paintings. Soon the hallway was almost entirely engulfed in raging hellfire. And Cirno, following in Flandre's wake flew right into

it. "Wahhhh!" she gasped in a panicked shock. She rose her small hands in defense of the boiling air that hit her full on in the face. She coughed at the black smoke. "What's going on in this castle?" Cirno felt like someone definitely had it in for her. The bottom of her dress caught fire and she fanatically smacked the affected area with her hand. "Stupid fire! GET OFF'A ME!" She dropped to the floor and with a quick motion froze the affected area on her now blackened dress, thus ending the risk of herself turning into a fairy candle. Her cobalt eyes searched for a safe way through the burning storm of fire but fate rewarded her with a big fat nothing. Flames were spreading across the carpeted floor, coating it in a sea of waving, blazing grass. They seemed to have a mind of their own as they slowly crept towards the ice fairy's position, clinging to anything flammable in the process. Cirno rubbed under her chin thoughtfully. "Guess I'll have to make my own path."

Up ahead Flandre grinned as she finally caught sight of a strange shadowy shape moving away from her before disappearing through a large stone archway. She remembered the aura that had surrounded the thief outside the castle and immediately recognized it as Claudette. All her heightened vampire senses screamed at her that this dark morphing mass was her target wrapping in shadows. Nice trick thought Flandre, but it won't save you. Flandre zoomed through the archway, positively enthralled by her sighting of the illusive thief. On the other side lay a long corridor which stretched off into darkness, the only light provided by torches hung on the walls. There was no end in sight as Flandre rushed headlong into the dank passageway. She heard metallic pinging sounds up ahead just before she was surrounded on all sides by holes in the walls, flooring and ceiling. She was going to fast to avoid them and wouldn't have abandoned her single minded pursuit even if she had had the time to consider otherwise. Her red glowing gaze took in the odd sight in wonder, puzzling over their purpose. She heard more pinging sounds up ahead and grinned, imagining that Claudette had run into a little trouble. It wasn't until she had taken a few leaps that her own troubles began. Her mouth opened slowly in surprise as a cruel jagged looking arrow shot out from one of the floor holes just ahead

of her. She had just landed from a particularly long lump and jerked her head backwards as the black plumed arrow sped up through the air just a hairs breath away from her chin and hit the ceiling above with a loud pinging sound. Flandre gulped as she heard rusty metal machinery groan and click behind the walls. Things were about to turn ugly.

Realizing that standing still would be a fools move she spread her shining wings out and rose off the ground before launching off down the trap laden corridor with blinding speed, a trail of glittering magic escaping from her wingtips as she went. Arrows started shooting out from every direction, creating a rainstorm of deadly sharp objects. Flandre was no stranger to dodging clouds of dangerous danmaku and so twisted and shifted herself through the worst of it but the narrow confines of the corridor made things much more difficult than they needed to be. She sniffed a toxic scent in the air and suspected that the arrowheads were poisoned. She snorted in contempt at this trickery and started to push arrows away with small controlled detonations of destructive energy. "Take this!" Bang! Each time she extended her finger, a fiery miniature explosion formed on her fingertip. Bang! Each time the small rapture flung the blots away, keeping her from becoming a flying pincushion until the next mass of arrows tried their luck. That made navigating the crossfire much easier.

Still, the constant zipping sound as countless arrows hurtled past her ears put her nerves on edge but Flandre was totally determined not to lose her focus and let Claudette slip away yet again. "Flying pests," snarled Flandre as one arrow embedded itself in her precious blue cloudy carry bag that had faithfully carried her items safely on her hazardous adventure. It better not have pieced my blood bottle or I'll blow the entire castle to rubble. Like a unstoppable force, Flandre ducked and weaved herself through the shooting range of arrows while blasting any large concentrations of flying death out of the air. Flaming blots began to fall to the ground in droves. The black feathers used as fletchings gave them the appearance of burning crows as they twisted downwards. After suffering a near constant

bombardment for over a minute the younger scarlet sister finally cleared the small holes which had spouted danger from all directions.

Sweat trickled down her brow and she allowed herself a quick sigh of relief. That small perilous moment felt like an eternity. She didn't feel a single cut on her exposed arms and legs, nor was her clothing torn. That was good. The poison might not be strong enough to kill her but fighting an infection could be a death sentence in itself if she had to face Yumeko again. Her blue bag flapped wildly at her side, the black arrow still embedded in the middle of a cloud. A testament to her ordeal. A distant light appeared up ahead, promising sanctuary from this dank and claustrophobic tunnel but this deadly passageway wasn't finished with her just yet. Flandre heard the creaking of old gears behind the stone walls and readied herself for whatever further traps were in store for her. The faintly blonde hairs on the back of her head stood up as a wave of anticipation and excitement washed over her. "Bring it on!" she shouted, her blood lighting up with energy. Flandre eyed a thin sheet of corroded metal with a hollow line through the middle which stretched around the entire tunnel. In the dark passageway it would have been extremely easy to miss this critical detail. But they'll never catch me with their tricks.

The wind swept through her hair as she flew up to the cavity in the walls. The gears in the wall were still grinding against each other, promising some impending doom as Flandre rapidly approached the small vent. No sooner than she did two giant gleaming blades fell from both corners, threatening to catch the vampire in a deadly crosscut. Flandre had been building power inside herself and unleashed it all in an instant, increased her speed ten fold. She sent herself hurtling past the curved blades as they clashed together in a shower of sparks. "Too easy!" she yelled before spitting in a show of contempt at the tunnels failure. The constant grown of the grinding gears were starting to wear down her patience. "Shut up," she yelled at no one in particular. She cranked her neck around, almost daring for someone to show themselves and take account for their failures to kill her. Machines were too inhuman an opponent for her. They

didn't feel, they didn't bleed. She eyed the cold stone tunnel with intense suspicion as the gloomy backdrop passed by beneath her, almost anticipating that some kind of monster would lift a stone away and jump out at her suddenly.

The creaking and clanking of the gears sped up and the noise became akin to someone dragging their nails against a chalk board. Such a deafening sound! Flandre snarled, frowning as the horrible melody did its best to drive her insane. Her hands shielded her ears. She shook her head in order to shake the bats from her mind. Shut up! Just shut the hell up! Before she could vent her frustrations the stones started to move. They turned so fast for such heavy rock! Within a few seconds the stone coating of the entire corridor was turning in on itself to reveal a clear and reflective surface on the other side. The insufferable clanking gears finally groaned to a halt as the stones shifted into place. Flandre blinked in confusion but she didn't allow herself the luxury of panic. Fear killed after all. A few arrows whooshed through the air, coming at her from unseen places but the weight of fire was not even half the amount that Flandre had evaded earlier so she altered her flight path and avoided the poisoned arrowheads with little difficulty. It took her a few moments to identify the new exterior but when she realized what it was she threw back her head and laughed.

They were mirrors! A whole gleaming corridor of mirrors designed to confuse someones senses so that the arrows would find their mark but such a trap was wasted on a vampire. Nothing was reflected on the smooth clear surface of the mirrors apart from the zipping black featured arrows. Normally her lack of a reflection would depress her a little but this was one instance in that not having a reflection was a benefit and not something that was denied to only her and sister. She chuckled to herself at the craftmans' wasted effort and tried to imagine their stupefied faces as she reached the end of the tunnel. "Stupid humans," she muttered. Assuming humans built this device that is but if machinery was involved it was usually humans that were responsible. Flandre shook her head, ridding herself of her pointless musings. She needed to focus. She stiffed the air and was pleased

to find that the sweet, rich smell of blood still lingered like a promise of things to come. Claudette was close. Very close indeed if her nose was telling her the truth. Flandre grinned. She had emerged into a lavishly decorated treasure trove. That was the only way her mind could describe it. All around her lay expertly crafted monuments complete with glittering jewelry. There were dazzling displays of masterwork swords, shields and armour, many of them inside glass cases. A massive shining blue diamond the size of a fairy dominated the center of the room, mounted on a spinning platform; all the better to marvel at its breathtaking splendor. Torches hung from the walls, illuminating the prized collection in a ghostly gloom.

Gold trimmed red carpet surrounded the displays so that an interested party could walk around the attractions. The owner obviously liked to show off. Flandre just had a mental image of Cirno trying to wrestle that imposingly large diamond off its turntable before hefting it above her head in triumph. Then her legs would wobble and the oversized crystal would splatter her into an icy soap. "Don't touch anything Cirno. I know you're eyeing that diamond but don't even think about it. I don't want to have to save you from any traps, understand? Hey, I said DO YOU UNDERSTAND?" She glanced behind her and saw no icy fairy with her usually carefree expression to greet her. She must have fallen behind. I hope she'll be ok but I need to press on. She spotted a few darker patches of red on the otherwise magnificent carpet and immediately identified it as blood from Claudette's leg wound. Oh dear, it seems like the noose is tightening around your neck, thief. Shadows may hide you but blood never lies. Ignoring the temptation to take a little souvenir of her own; Flandre stealthy hugged the large displays, quickly weaving around them while sniffing out the scent of her prey. Her finely honed senses told her that no guards were patrolling the treasure room. That was strange but Flandre had no time to worry about the finer details.

She pressed her back against a towering marble statue of a knight holding his sword to the heavens and poked her head around the corner. The scent and blood trail led up to a stone archway covered by a hanging red and gold cloth emblazoned with a coat of arms: A



shield with swords sticking out either side of it and a majestic unicorn's head on top. Flandre crept forwards tentatively, breathing softly. Claudette was on the other side of this cloth; of that she was certain. Well, its time to end this little game. Flandre roared like a lion and burst through the hanging cloth into the waiting room beyond, eagerly looking around for Claudette with hungry eyes and outstretched claws. The thief was nowhere to be found however but Flandre wouldn't be fooled. She grinned. Hiding again are we? I know you're in here somewhere, sulking like a little terrified lamb ready for the slaughter. The room she found herself in was an enormous circular dome with marble pillars spaced evenly on the sides. The floors looked like a chess board with its black and white square design. It was polished to a high shine, so much so that Flandre could see her reflection as her shoes tapped across its surface, creating echoes in this grand cavern of a room. She studied herself quietly for a moment before scanning the rest of her surroundings. There were a few lesser displays of the usual arms and armour, jewels and decorations but the thing that caught her eye was a black pillar right at the back.

It was flanked by two herculean suits of ancient looking black armour inscribed with strange green lettering across its limbs and body. The armour was jagged and cruel looking, adorned as it was by barbs and spikes. Their giant gauntleted hands held immense weapons taller than Meiling who towered over Flandre. She stood silent and menacing but quite dead and lifeless. Upon the black pillar rested a jewel, smaller than the others she had passed but it was quite possibly the most beautiful jewel she had ever seen. Much like her own wings, it shone with all the colours of the rainbow. Like a kaleidoscope, sharp beams of red, blue, yellow and green emanated from its core. It seemed alive, pulsing like a heart. Every pulse produced a different set of colours and when the beams crossed each other, they fractured and sparkled like fireworks. Flandre was dumbstruck and for a moment all she could do was stare at the crystals splendorous form in awe.

"Quite impressive isn't it?" came a familiar voice from behind one of the black knights. Claudette strode confidently out into the open, just behind the black pillar and its dazzling jewel. She wore that same cocky smirk as always, like she was silently laughing at something. "Its known as the pegasus gem and is really quite a valuable little trinket. Its the main reason I came to this castle in the first place." Flandre bared her teeth into a mean looking scowl and began to slowly raise a hand. Claudette held her own hands up, waving them dismissively. "Oh my. Still angry about being used? Didn't we use each other? I helped you into the castle to escape the harsh cold while all I expect in return is a little assistance in accomplishing my goals. What is so wrong with that?"

Flandre looked at her coldly, her red eyes seemed to be boring into the thief's soul. "I am not anyone's fool," she declared, angrily stabbing a finger at Claudette. "What really irritates me is your cocky attitude. Showing up out of nowhere and rubbing our noses in the fact that we've been made into a patsy. That condescending grin of yours, acting like you're so far above us. Well you're just a common thief, a mortal just like all the others and I'll show you how mortal you really are." Flandre took a step forwards and balled her hand into a fist, holding it upwards in a show of determination. She leaned forwards into a vengeful looking sneer. "I've had fun in this castle, so for that I thank you but I really want to wipe that stupid grin off your face."

Claudette ran a hand through her ash brown hair and sighed, shaking her head. "Oh don't be like that. I'll cut you in if you help me out. How about it? I could make you a very rich Youkai." She winked at Flandre suggestively and that was about all the taunting that Flandre could take. The vampire crouched downwards and sprung, snarling as her claws slashed downwards. Claudette grabbed the pegasus gem and flung it at Flandre, the beams of rainbow light flashing before her eyes. Flandre flinched and snatched the gem out of the air before it hit her, blinking away the spots of colour that clouded her vision. The thief was nowhere to be seen and had slipped away in the brief second that Flandre had been bewildered

by the light show but she wasn't fooled. "You can't hide from me thief," she spat, sniffing the air intently as she placed the blinding gem inside her little carry bag. The scent of blood quickly lead her gaze to one of the marble pillars on the lefthand side of the curved room. Shadows hung around the column like a spider web and Flandre caught the faintest glimpse of a hand or brush of brownish hair occasionally poke outside of the dark camouflage. The center of the pillar exploded into white stony pieces as Flandre sent waves of destructive yellow lightening hurtling towards the supposed hiding place of Claudette. The shadows dissipated and faded as the sneaky cat burglar rolled out of the way of the blasts, leaping backwards to avoid fresh new attacks as Flandre spotted her trying to escape her just punishment.

Claudette rolled behind another pillar just as several large crackling blasts impacted on the wall behind her, before appearing again having flown up to the domed ceiling while using the pillar as cover. Flandre spotted something small and shiny flying at her and flew into the air herself. She saw Claudette smiling slyly as she produced another needle like knife from seemingly nowhere but before she could throw it the pillar, having been badly damaged, began to crumble and topple to the floor. Both combatants flew out of the shadow of the pillars as its colossal form came crashing down in a shower of sharp marble fragments. It split in two before it hit the ground, smacking the ground with immense force. The curved room shook violently, the black and white panel flooring shattering as the massive hammerblow smashed it to pieces, flinging chunks of stone and marble all over the place. When the dust had settled the domed display room resembled nothing less than a full blown war zone. The smaller displays had been knocked to pieces and swords and armour littered the floor, joining the numberless stone fragments and chunks of alabaster.

Flandre rose to her feet, dusting off her scuffed knees and brushing marble particles out of her blonde hair. She had lost her hat somewhere in the confusion but didn't have time to look for it now. Flandre coughed as she breathed in the stony mist that had formed

in the room. Chunks of stone were still falling to earth, making it difficult to hear and the misty concoction made her eyes water as dust settled around her face. Still, Claudette made no effort to side herself this time and stood in plain view near the archway that let outside of the treasure room. She was rotating one arm in its socket while rubbing her shoulder but her gaze was firmly fixed on her vampire opponent. "I'll take that as a no then." Claudette shook her head and sighed. "Stupid little girl. You should have taken my offer while you had the chance. I'll not give you another one." Flandre angrily raised her hands again, ready to continue her onslaught. I'll destroy the entire castle if I have to as long as your broken body is among all the blackened rubble. Now should I use lightening again? Maybe I'll melt the flesh off your bones. She almost didn't notice the large shadow looming over her before it was too late. She heard the whoosh of displaced air and jumped forwards instinctively just in time to avoid the giant spiked mace that smashed the already smashed flooring into stone mush, creating a deep crater where she had just been standing.

She turned around to behold the two suits of armour standing upright and looking at her silently with glowing green eyes hiding behind their great helmets. One of them jerked its mace free from the giant crater it had just created and advanced on Flandre, its armour groaning with each heavy step it took. The green lettering adorning its body shone with a earthly green glow, bathing everything around it in a foreboding light. The energy of magic was heavy in the air, causing the hairs on the back of Flandre's neck to rise up. These knights were long dead, devoid of any kind of scent or spiritual presence and only some kind of archaic spell was moving this ages old armour again. "These old guardians attack anyone they deem threatening to the gem," Claudette breathed Flandre's ear. A cold sweat formed on Flandre's forehead as she realized that she had turned her back on the mercenary woman. She winched as something cold and narrow pieced her skin, stabbing through her red dress just below the wings. She spun around, slashing behind her wildly but Claudette had already moved out of reach. Flandre started after her but stumbled, a hazy wave of dizziness washing over her

like a tidal-wave. Her lungs felt like they were on fire her pores opened up, sweating like a pig held over a campfire. Her vision blurred as she suddenly became extremely tired and almost blacked out before she pinched herself hard enough to draw blood.

"And right now that person is you," Claudette said, smiling while holding up for Flandre to see. Something strangely familiar. It took Flandre's troubled mind a moment to realized that it was her own little blue bag, still with its black arrow hanging out the side. It glowed faintly as the fabric fought to contain the glowing pegasus gem. Her hands fell to her side, frantically padding the area where her favorite bag was supposed to be but the straps had been cut and her hands found nothing. Claudette waved at her before turning away and running through the archway. "Keep the knights entertained!" she called before completely disappearing from sight once again. Flandre began to drunkenly run after her while silently cursing the thief's name but she became dimly aware that she wasn't alone in the room. She clumsily avoided being cut in two as one of the knights slashed at the air she had occupied just a moment before and turned face to face into the menacing green stare of the guardians of the treasure room. Her aching body and hazy mind wanted nothing more then to lie down and rest but Flandre willed herself to stay conscious with every fiber of her being. Falling asleep would mean death and she still had so much to live for. Sister, Cirno and of course most important of all, revenge.

# Collapse

"G-get away f-from me!" Flandre stammered, hoping the empty threat would buy her some time to recover as she stumbled drunkenly away from the gargantuan twin knights. Every heavy step they took sounded like a thunder strike in the domed treasure room. Each step echoed in Flandre's head, giving her a splitting headache to go along with the intense feelings of nausea. She swiped blindly at the air, almost throwing up. "Shut the hell up!" she shouted, clutching her head tightly while struggling to stand upright, as if she was in a strong wind or sleep walking. If the knights had any will or their own or were even capable of understanding the much smaller Youkai's plea, Flandre didn't know or particularly care but they didn't respond in any case. The knights green glowing eyes were hidden behind their great black helms and were fixed firmly on the floundering vampire as they tightly clutched the giant oversized hand weapons they held in silent readiness.

Seemingly out of the blue, the knights suddenly started to sprint across the treasure room like a pair of colossal charging bulls. They acted together, barreling down on Flandre at some unspoken command. Flandre strained her eyes, her blurry vision seeing four pairs of giant armour rushing dangerously close to her instead of two. A pair of large shadows loomed over her and she felt the rush of wind as something big and heavy whooshed downwards, violently displacing the air, pushing it against her skin. Her mind worked slowly but Flandre knew it would be very bad if she stayed put in her present position. She jumped back as a massive spiked mace smashed into the area she had just been inhabiting, turning it into a sea of broken and cracked stone fragments. The great helms noisily creaked upwards as they followed Flandre's progress; their menacing green gaze locked onto Flandre like grim specters of doom. While the one knight yanked his mace free from the rubble, the other rushed past its twin, moving faster than anything his size had any right to. It was holding a jagged looking battleaxe large enough to cut a dragons head off with a single well placed strike.

Flandre stumbled backwards awkwardly as she landed, grunting as she slammed into one of the grooved stone pillars. Thankfully she managed to thrust her hands out at the last second to avoid leaving a painfully deep face print in the stone. Flandre felt bile rise up her throat. Urgh! I just want to throw up! She saw a flickering green flash as the ruins lining the knight's body served as a vital warning that the danger was not yet over. The axe knight lunged forwards, hefting its gigantic axe in a double handed grip and slashed across with it in a deadly arc. It dug into the heavy marble pillar, the immense strength behind it driving it forwards until it cut cleanly through the pillar like some executioner lopping off a traitor's head. Flandre however had kept her head on its shoulders for now by ducking low and rushing behind the pillar but she heard the lagged cut above her as it cleaved through the hard marble, flecks of stone pelting the top of her head. She silently wished she still had her hat and threw up all over the floor.

"Urgghhhhh," she heaved as her cheeks turned a deep rosy red. The vampire flinched as she heard a ear-splitting crumbling sound behind her as the pillar started to collapse. The ground shook as the two colossal halves began to fall back to earth, their huge shadow looming over Flandre who suddenly felt very much like an insect waiting to be squished. She looked up at the rapidly falling pillar, fighting to keep her footing as the domed room thundered and shook. Her teary eyes tried to focus on the blurry object and she felt another wave of nausea sweep over her like a punch in the stomach which drove her to her knees, as if she had accepted her fate. No, she thought, resisting the urge to lay down and enter a long sleep. I don't like this. I'm not having fun at all. I hate feeling like this! "I hate this!" she screamed, and in her desperation she unleashed every ounce of power she could summon in her weakened condition, creating a blinding crimson mass of red crackling lightening around her that swirled around her head like a bloody halo.

The whirling red energy cloud grew, feeding off its master's despair as loud crackling red tendrils of power lashed out, scorching everything around it. The massive, tumbling lower half of the pillar

was stopped in its tracks as the volatile red storm pushed against it, the marble starting to melt and blacken as it came into contact with the fiery onslaught that Flandre had unwittingly created. It was the knights turn to stumble as an entire section of the castle was enveloped in this ground shacking destructive display. The domed roof started to collapse as the pillars that supported it were shaken apart at the very foundation. The now gigantic red whirlwind had grown to the size of the large clock face that adorned one of the scarlet mansions towers. Rubble fell like rain, crumbling downwards. A constant roaring sound filled the air as the extremely volatile energy circled around Flandre who was acting as the eye of this very dangerous storm. The vampire opened her eyes just long enough to see the blurry figure of the axe knight as it struggled to keep its footing while ponderously advancing towards her, its phantasmal gaze locked on the younger scarlet sister. Its green glowing ruins and ghostly eyes made Flandre remember all the harm done to her. She winced painfully as a tremor rocked her body and then she leaned back her head and screamed.

All at once, Flandre lost what little subconscious control she may have possessed over the crackling energy cloud and the effect was instantaneous. The red swelling mass billowed more violently than ever as the multiple flowing shades of crimson flowed into each other, creating a maddening panting that made no sense whatsoever. The loud continuous racket become almost unbearably loud and the room began to shake on a scale far beyond that of an earthquake. Then the energy mass collapsed and folded, hungrily eating itself until it had regressed to the size of a large beach ball, rotating above the screaming form of Flandre. Her eyes now burned with the intensity of a pair of burning suns. Her irises formed into narrow slits that gave her the impression of a demon. The rapidly rotating sphere above her blurred a little as the laws governing its existence struggled to contain its overwhelming power and then they didn't need to anymore as the spinning sphere exploded spectacularly. The blinding red light swelled outwards in every direction with Flandre at its core. It was quite a beautiful display to behold but everything around her was destroyed in a deafening



cataclysmic blast that reduced the domed room and much of the castle beyond to nothingness.

Stone was blown apart, metal cooked and bent and wood was atomized as the relentless wave of annihilation engulfed the castle, pushing onward to claim fresh areas to sate its hunger. As the mixture of torment and anger left Flandre's mind, so too did the energy that fed the swirling mass. Without its master to draw power from the force that had rocked the castle to its core finally started to frizzle out and dissipate, leaving behind a patchwork of ruins and devastation. A vast area of the castle had been demolished, wiped off the land completely. It was as if someone had scoped out a large section of the castles inner chambers as the damage formed a rough circle with Flandre at its core. As the vampire was in the epicenter of the blast she was completely unharmed as was the section of stone flooring she sat upon. Almost all of the flooring had been burned to a crisp so Flandre found herself isolated on an island of stone in a sea of broken and ruined foundations.

Snow began to fall inside the castle since large sections of the roofing had been blow apart. She looked up as a snowflake glided downwards on invisible currents of wind and landed atop her nose. She was breathing heavily, not entirely sure what she had done but she knew that she had lost control of herself somehow. The kind of thing that sister was always afraid would happen and constantly warned her about. "Sorry sister," she said softly, almost a whisper. Her face was plastered with dried tears, her cheeks still flushed an angry red colour. She sniffled and tried to stand up but stumbled, still unsteady on her feet. Snow continued to fall around her as she let out a loud burp before clutching her belly and retching her guts out.

Elsewhere in one of the countless dank and dusty corridors that crisscrossed the castle like a maze, Cirno was busy grabbing onto a solid looking statue to steady her feet as Flandre's disastrous outburst rocked the castle in one of the worst earthquakes the little fairy had ever experienced. "W-what g-going on?" she stammered as the intense vibrations coursed through her, making her speech come

out all slurred. Dust and cobwebs were knocked from the rafters. A vase of flowers fell from a heavy looking oak display table and smashed on the floor. The table itself was rocking unsteadily on its heavy looking legs. "Is this s-some kind of e-earthquake?" she sputtered as her little body was sent stumbling about like a rag doll, her four icy wings which had reformed somewhat were busy flapping uselessly in an attempt to keep her stable.

Her snowy white fingers clutched the statue even tighter, causing ice crystals to form beneath her grip. One of the wall fixings holding up a torch came loose and the sudden bright burst of flame as the torch hit the floor caused Cirno to almost jump out of her skin. The fairy had visions of the fiery hell she had escape scant moments before but thankfully there was no carpet to set aflame this time. Still, the violent earthquake and exploding torch combined to give Cirno the impression that the world was somehow coming to an abrupt end. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut the way a child would to avoid having to deal with things. "Stop f-falling down, s-stupid castle!" she wailed, appealing uselessly to the lifeless walls to keep her safe.

She grabbed the statue even tighter, hugging it with her entire body. It looked like she was giving the statue of some random noble man a loving embrace but she didn't care one bit what Flandre might have said had she been by her side. Instead, the fairy was extremely thankful for something stable to latch herself onto. It seemed like the heavy figure was the only thing not shaking madly in her immediate vicinity. Even her milky white teeth were chattering in her jaw from the endless series of vibrations so she clamped her mouth shut to avoid hurting herself. A chandelier came loose and crashed to the ground, the intricate diamonds along its length shattering in a shower of crystal fragments. Cirno screamed as some of the sharp pieces brushed harmlessly against her thigh, convinced that the next thing to fall down would land right on top of her but her fears were for naught. When she eventually plucked up the courage to open her eyes again, the mighty tremor had passed her by without collapsing the ceiling on top of her. One last shake and whatever had befallen

the castle seemed to have passed. Grains of rock fell from cracks in the ceiling.

Cirno sighed in relief, rubbing some of the stony dust that had accumulated in her aqua hair. She looked up, her eyes widening at the snaking cracks that now crisscrossed the ceiling like some bizarre decoration. Deciding that standing directly below the weakened ceiling wouldn't be a smart move, Cirno silently waved goodbye to the statue that had helped her in her time of need and left the room in search of Flandre. She had lost the vampire's trail when she had zoomed ahead in pursuit of Claudette and had been wondering around ever since, trying to pick up any sign of her troublesome friend. I bet Flandre had something to do with that earthquake or whatever it was, Cirno thought to herself, remembering the trail of destruction she had followed before. If she wrecked the whole castle then how would I find her? One pile of rubble looked just like any other. She shook her head like a dog shaking its coat. Damn dust. Its gotten everywhere.

As Cirno walked carefully down the corridor, listening out for any potential troublemakers (which included Flandre) as she went, she started to notice the full extent of the damage. On her left the walls were all cracked and weakened which included the statues and various other decorations scattered about the place. "What has that vampire done this time?" Cirno had by this point convinced herself that Flandre had been responsible. Who else would have done this? It didn't seem like that thief would give herself away like that and the castle workers wouldn't destroy their own home? Would they? That blonde maid did seem a little crazy. Cirno shuddered as she remembered the knife at her throat. Water was leaking from up above from cracks in the ceiling. Tap tap tap it went. Cirno stood under it and let the refreshing water droplets fall onto her face for a moment before stepping over a heavy looking door that had been thrown off its hinges somehow. She peered around curiously to look inside the room and something large and screaming leapt out from the shadows.

"Whooooaaa!" Cirno yelled, jumping back as a terrified maid ran out of the now empty door frame waving her hands in the air as she manically pleaded for her life. "Don't eat me! Don't eat me!" Cirno took in a big lungful of air and clutched her chest, making sure her heart didn't freeze solid. "S-stupid maid. Scaring me like that." What was wrong with everyone? She was a fairy, not a vampire. Cirno wondered in the room and slumped in a nearby comfy chair that was the only thing not turned over or broken in some way. "Ouch!" Cirno winced and reached behind her to find a piece of pointy stone that had been stabbing her in the back. She angrily threw the stone away, which hit a wooden beam that had been dislodged from the ceiling which in turn dislodged the crumbling black stone that it had been precariously supporting up until that point. Cirno yelped and rolled out of the chair as the front end of the ceiling collapsed, burying the chair and anything around it in damaged bricks and a thick cloud of choking dust.

Cirno picked herself up, looking up at the falling pile of debris and wondered if anything in this hazardous castle was safe anymore. The falling ceiling reminded her of a hourglass the way the dark brick dust intermingled with larger chunks of stone poured downwards relentlessly. It only took a few seconds for her fairy throne to be completely buried from sight but thankfully without its queen. Queen? Cirno smiled at the thought. She'd make a great queen, she was sure of it. Then no one would ever make fun of her again. She held up a hand to her mouth and coughed as the floating soup ceiling dust drifted around like some unwelcome smell. Cirno decided to leave the room and resume her search for Flandre. Now, which passageway looks the most ruined? She paused as footsteps sounded out from the corridor leading from of the room. Cirno hesitated, a step away from the archway and quickly snuck back inside. "Do you think this way is safe?" came a deep sounding voice. "It's safer than keeping the search party waiting," replied someone with a softer tone. "Just watch the ceiling. I don't trust those beams anymore after what happened in the dining hall."

The footsteps approached the door like some unseen monster out of a fairy tale and Cirno was certain that they would blunder inside and find her hiding behind an overturned chest of draws but the moment passed and the voices grew distant like fading memories. Cirno frowned. She was sure there had only been two voices. So why was she hiding? She was the powerful icy fairy, feared for her danmaku mastery and Youkai always stood up and took notice of her. She nodded to herself in encouragement and flew out of the room on a current of icy wind to stand resolutely in the center of the corridor. The two figures recoiled in panic, frantically scanning the roofing as Cirno's light shoes double tapped on the ground behind them, echoing down the passageway. "The ceilings coming down!" the first one wailed, a short brown haired maid. "Don't just stand there then!" the other female said who was dressed in a jet black robe and bore a ordinate staff in one hand. The one looking like a mage gave her companions back an encouraging nudge, urging the maid onwards. They started to sprint away from the slightly perplexed fairy, not even sparing the time to look behind them. Cirno frowned again and mumbled something inaudible, her cheeks turning red in annoyance.

"Hey, don't ignore me!" she called out. The maid glanced behind her as she ran, her headdress bobbing loosely atop her head. "Don't stand there little fairy," she called back. "The ceiling is not safe." "Go back to the nearest maid quarters fairy," the mage snapped before they both rounded a corner and disappeared from sight. "I am not a maid!" Cirno yelled defiantly. No one ever respects fairies, well, that will change. She lifted off the ground, hovering like a hummingbird as her icy wings (which had almost returned to their former glorious size) fanned out in six directions and glimmered with a faint cold looking glow. Then she hurtled after them, rounding the corner and catching up with them within a few seconds. The maid glanced behind her again just as Cirno sent out a freezing jet of super cold ice particles that struck the running maids legs and froze her in place like a statue as the ice hugged her thighs tightly in their cold embrace. "What's this?" the maid shrieked. She wobbled uncertainly in place for a moment, arms flailing for purchase before her forward momentum pitched her forwards, resulting in the poor maid

collapsing to the cold hard stone, the icy prison holding her shattering under the strain. Her black maids dress hung over her head and body and it looked like someone had draped a cloth respectfully over the recently deceased.

"Opps," Cirno breathed. At least the fairy hoped she wasn't dead. "What have you done?" snapped the mage who rounded on her angrily with fire literally in her eyes. It was a dull flame but it was still there. The flames that had formed around her staff however were much larger and roared with an intense savagery. Her black robes billowed in the backdraft created but Cirno just smirked and aimed her icy spray at the fire. She had many specialties, almost too many to count on two hands and extinguishing fire was right at the top of the list. "Hah," the mage snorted as the ice and fire clashed in a dazzling magical light show. "Fairies should learn there place!" The arcane energies mingled and swirled around each other, creating a multicoloured orb as the two forces wrestled for dominance. The mage's smirk faulted however as the blue onslaught started to rapidly swallow up the red fiery inferno and started to work its way down her staff, making it resemble a frozen tree in a wasteland. "Impossible!" she stammered, too surprised to form words and dropped the staff before the cold unforgiving grip captured her hand along with the staff.

Cirno stood there wearing the most exuberant grin she could manage without stretching her jaw wider than it was capable. She rubbed her hands together and tilted her head confidently as the mage looked at the ice fairy totally stupefied. "Don't underestimate us fairies lady. You just ran into the strongest of the lot!" Cirno said, indicating herself with a stabbing thump as if modesty was a foreign concept to her. The mage didn't look impressed and fiery embers formed under her robe, miraculously not setting them aflame. A icy ball splattered against her chest, the force of the blow flinging her backwards against the wall. "Urugh," she grunted as her back hit the black stone but Cirno wasn't finished yet and launched two more balls at her, both expertly hitting her arms and pinning them to the wall like superglue as the icy mass instantly froze rock solid the moment

it contacted something. Cirno tried to smile menacingly as she strolled up to her immobilized opponent but her smaller stature made her look like a naughty child. "Not talking so tough now are you?"

The mage snarled and spat at Cirno but the fluid just froze in midair and dropped to the floor like a snowflake in front of Cirno's cold eyes. "Ewwwwwww, that's disgusting. I'll teach you some manners!" She walked up and touched the snow affected area on the mage's chest and immediately it started to blossom and grow as if the fairy had somehow bestowed it the gift of life. It spread rapidly, branching out in all directions as it snaked across the mage's robes and inside her clothes. "Stop, stop! It's freezing," she pleaded, real fear starting to show in her expression for the first time. Cirno sighed and the encroaching ice slowed down and then stopped. "Don't try anything or I'll freeze you into a popsicle, understand?" The mage nodded, watching the ice like it would come alive and finish her off at any moment. Cirno wondered over to the fallen maid and lifted the skirt away from her, exposing her crumpled form. She was still breathing and only appeared dazed and for that Cirno was thankful but she kept her relief inside lest she look weak in front of this conjurer. She had an idea and didn't want to ruin it.

"You better answer my questions mage or you know what'll happen." Cirno wagged an accusing finger, her wings flickering in an echo of the gesture. "Nod if you understand." The mage nodded slowly, looking distraught and Cirno tried to keep a smile from appearing on her face. Finally someone was giving her due respect and attention for once. She mentally shook her head. Trying to act menacing was a lot tougher than it looked and she wasn't used to it at all. Her threatening smirk faulted a little as she pondered on what exactly to ask. Her eyes widened as she realized the perfect question. She kept her voice level and firm instead of her usual cheerful tone. "Where is Flandre?" The mage looked perplexed at the question. No doubt she was cooking up some far flung excuse or stupid lie. Well, Cirno wouldn't be fooled or misled. "Who's Flandre?" the mage carefully answered after a brief pause. "Don't try and lie to me or I'll ummm... turn you into a human ice cube!"

"I really don't know who you're talking about. Just let me go and I'll go about my business." The mage squirmed uncomfortably at the frozen restraints holding her firmly in place. Cirno flashed with the embarrassing realization that this person couldn't possibly know Flandre's name. Damn it Cirno! You need to think harder. The icy fairy rubbed under her chin thoughtfully as if the answer she had received had been useful after all. "A-ah I see. Now tell me where the intruder is and don't think about lying to me!" The mage blinked and shook her hooded head, perhaps deciding how much to say. "We don't know where they are. I certainly didn't know where you were for instance but its obvious that whoever has invaded this castle was responsible for the massive destruction that has befallen this place. Tell me? Why are you trying to destroy this castle?"

"I'm not trying to destroy anything. Fairies aren't like that. I'm just trying to find someone that has gotten lost in here, that's all. If you help me I can be on my way and leave you alone. So, how about it?" She left out the part about finding treasure and adventure but the mage didn't need to know about the finer details. The mage considered Cirno's response, wincing as the ice shifted around her wrists. "We're organizing a search party near the main gallery to comb the damaged northern wing of the castle, where the treasure room is located. If you want to find your friend, look there. Now, please take these binds off me. I'm losing the feeling in my hands." Cirno could see that her captives arms had grown incredibly pale as the ice crystals had formed along her skin. Soon she would start to suffer from the effects of frostbite. Cirno didn't want to cause anyone serious harm, it wasn't in her nature, so she decided to let the troublesome magic user go. With a few conditions of course. "Fine, I'll let you go but you need to help that maid down there and not try to chase me or you'll be pretty sorry!" The magic user nodded somberly, resigned. "Oh and one more thing," Cirno added, a genuine smile forming on her lips instead of the false smirk. "Call me Queen Cirno and ask respectfully for my royal pardon." Cirno had always wanted someone to call her queen and now seemed like as good an opportunity as she was going to get.



"D-don't be silly. I answered your questions, now let me go." Cirno, still smiling, turned and started to walk away in an exaggeratedly slow manner, confident that she wouldn't have to move far. The fairy's pale blue eyes looked to the side expectantly as she casually strode away. "Hey, wait a moment! You're just going to leave me here?" came a voice from behind her. "I'm not listening," Cirno replied who tussled with her hair absentmindedly. "Fine! Qu... Queen Cirno, please come back and free me!" Cirno liked the sound of that. Maybe she would insist that people call her that from now on or maybe she would become the queen of the fairies for real. After releasing the mage while carefully freezing her staff so that it was no longer unusable, she left the two figures behind her, confident that the fallen maid would be taken care of. Cirno had asked a few more questions before departing, hoping to find a clue as to the whereabouts of Flandre but had received no concrete answer. Instead Cirno had learned that the meeting point of the forces that were being assembled to locate her was not far away at all and she had decided to sneak within earshot and glean in order to glean any useful information she might just happen to overhear.

She started to giggle to herself as she thought of all the stupid guards that would inadvertently help her cause but clamped a hand over her mouth. She had to act stealthily, like Flandre had demonstrated and she was certainly not going to be outdone. So she stuck to the high balconies, the shadowy side passages and even the rafters in her efforts to avoid detection. There were also plenty of newly formed holes for her to sneak through, courtesy of the recent destruction. She heard the steady thump of boots on stone while perched on top of a stone gargoyle, one of many hanging off the black stone walls in this particularly large hallway which was relatively intact compared to some of the more ruined areas. About ten guards dressed in chain mail and leather hurried along the passageway, obviously in a hurry. Silver swords hung from their belts and Cirno mentally shuddered as she remembered the cold metal under her neck. She wouldn't let that happen again! No way! The guards were various types and sizes with only half of them humanoid. Cirno thought she spotted an Oni with its large muscular

frame and sharp looking horns. Another had birdlike arms and claws with purple feathers poking out from the chain mail but strangely no orange beak to complete the image.

Cirno watched as they passed obliviously beneath her, utterly clueless that one of the intruders was right above them. She suppressed another giggle and wondered if she could get away with lobbing a snowball at one of them and then disappearing from sight. Well, anything was possible for her but she decided to stay focused for once. The icy fairy followed them down a few more hallways and side passages and through a great ruined archway until she heard a voice shouting orders, one that she had heard before. Its echoed viciously down the hallway, making the guards visibly flinch like a smack across the face. Cirno would never forget that voice. It was definitely that mean spirited maid! "Where the hell have you lot been?" she demanded when the gaggle of guards vanished from Cirno's sight beneath a double set of heavy looking doors. The fairy cautiously crept forwards inch by inch until her back was pressed against the wall right next to the set of double doors the guards had entered. Her transparent blue wings caused icy frost to form wherever they happened to touch stone, marking the fairy's progress as she slowly crept towards the opening. The doors had been left invitingly open, almost beckoning Cirno to enter. Holding her breath, Cirno situated herself right next to the doors, poised and ready to sneak a look so when Yumeko resumed her irate shouting, Cirno's lungs drummed in her chest like they were trying to escape her body. "You are the last sorry lot to arrive and thus will be punished severely. However, those that bring me the heads of the intruders will be spared. Consider that a lifeline. Don't be so foolish as to waste it."

Ah, my chest! Cirno thought she was going to have a heart attack. This sneaking business wasn't as easy as it looked. If some stupid sword didn't get her these constant surprises would! Maybe they were some kind of terrible deliberate trap intended to fry her nerves like an electrical current. She wouldn't put it past the castles obviously mad creator. She decided to find another way or rather a safer way of eavesdropping. Judging from the echoes that the maids

wrathful shouting created, the area that the gathering was taking place in was quite large, most likely a large hall. With that in mind, Cirno stretched her icy wings and searched the upper floors for a passageway that would allow her to overlook the proceedings from a safe vantage point. She grinned as her efforts were quickly rewarded with the discovery of a balcony, which she promptly took advantage of by shifting herself into place behind one of the many balustrades wide enough to hide her small form completely. "You lot are a complete disgrace!" shouted Yumeko, eyeing daggers at the assembled guards, mages, maids and various other castle personal, almost daring someone to answer her back or try to make up some hair brained excuse. The one's closest to her visibly flinched, as if the words alone had the power to sway people. "Twelve guards dead!" she yelled, angrily punctuating the point by slashing one of her silver swords downwards in a vicious arc.

"Twenty four confirmed pieces of high value treasure stolen! A quarter of the castle reduced to ruins! Your complete inability to locate three intruders, one of which is a fairy for heaven's sakes! How can you allow yourself to be outwitted by a fairy!" Cirno mumbled something under her breath at that slight but resisted the urge to leap out and turn the hall into an ice cavern. Why did people always look down on fairies? Yumeko continued, pacing impatiently down the row of guards while waving her sword dangerously close as she went. "Even that overstuffed princess that the master is so fond of was assaulted in this very castle! This is totally unacceptable and someone WILL ANSWER FOR THIS!" She strolled over to a group of four guards who looked tired and beaten, their cloths and mail torn and blood stains smeared there leather clothing. Without saying a word, Yumeko brought up her sword and slashed the air one-handed, then brought it up for a return stroke, almost to fast to follow. Cirno only saw two flashes of bright silver before the sword was resting at the maids side once again with a thin film of blood decorating the underside of the blade. Almost as one, the four guards clutched their throats as a thick current of blood sprayed outwards from small expertly cut razor sharp wounds across the

fronts of their necks, staining the carpet an even deeper shade of crimson.

One of the guards gurgled something unintelligible as he tried to unsuccessfully stem the flow of lifeblood. One whimpered and staggered for help as he saw his very life flow out in front of him. A broad purple skinned guard lashed out at Yumeko with his sword in a final act of vengeance but the sword he used was silver and the maid sighed as it whipped up and stabbed its wilder through the underside of his jaw with a sickening crunch. He collapsed on the floor alongside those that had already succumbed to their wounds. "These four let that contemptuous thief escape with a much valued mirror. Their lives were not worth enough to cover the cost of the mirror but this will have to suffice. Heed this example!" The assembled minions shifted uncomfortably, probably wishing they were anywhere but here. Cirno shook her head and looked away when the blood started to spurt out like a fountain. She didn't like blood and certainly didn't like the way Yumeko treated people but certain Youkai were like that. More interested in hurting people than having a good time.

Yumeko wandered between and around the rows of guards, mages and maids while remaining utterly silent. Instilling fear by her inaction. Her servants not knowing which of them might be next as she strode behind them in her deep red maids outfit. Cirno thought red was a fitting colour for her. She wouldn't shed a tear if Flandre beat her up and she would be only too happy to lock her into a giant sheet of ice to cool her head off for a while. Finally Yumeko resumed speaking in her usual stern voice when she was sure that the desired affect had settled in. "The ruined wing of the castle most likely contains the vampire and fairy duo. Claudette wouldn't draw that much attention to herself. She is fairly well known to us after all. This contingent assembled here is assigned the task of clearing the treasure room and surrounding areas. I know you won't mess because I will be overseeing things personally. Similar groups will cut off the areas of retreat so we will pen them in like animals and kill or capture them. We still don't know why they are here after all."

Cirno swallowed hard. If Flandre was in that area she was about to be trapped. If she acted fast she might be able to find her before they did. A good fairy never leaves a friend behind! Cirno heard a door creak open below and a maid hurried into the room, wide eyed and frantically searching the room. When she spied Yumeko in amongst the rows of minions she sank slightly and sighed in relief. "Mistress Yumeko, I'm so glad I found you. Claudette has been sighted within the masters private wing. The master could be in grave danger! Several guards have been injured! Please come-" Yumeko didn't let her finish and shoved her out of the way as she sprinted out from sight. Cirno had heard enough and left the castles residents to babble incoherently amongst themselves. She would make it to Flandre before they did. She was sure of it!

## Poisoned Mind

The ruined flooring of what was left of the treasure room shook violently as the remaining knight slammed his massive spiked mace downwards onto the location that Flandre had just been previously standing on as she leapt backwards in disarray. Flandre snarled defiantly, refusing to give in to the almost uncontrollable urge to simply give up and lay down. Her body felt like it had been beaten by a pack of angry demons for hours and her forehead was dripping sweat like a water-fountain but she grimly pushed her tired muscles for every ounce of power they still possessed. At least her vision had returned to something approaching normal. Pieces of marble were thrown into the air as the knight yanked free his colossal weapon, producing another mini earthquake as he did so. His other armoured gauntlet drove under the flooring in a shower of stone, digging into it before heaving it up with all its considerable strength and flinging a large section of the castle at Flandre. It looked like a giant meteor formed from gray brinks, twisting and turning as it approached the vampire, becoming larger and larger as it loomed into vision, blocking out everything but its own considerable mass just like a solar eclipse.

Flandre's first instinct was to simply blast the hunk of stone into oblivion but her mind was just clear enough to advise her that her little outburst before had severely weakened her and she might not have the required energy to guarantee her survival if she was somehow too weak to blow it out of the sky. So she began to run to her left, spiriting as fast as her unsteady legs could carry her as a giant dark shadow loomed over her and continued to grow. She stumbled a little, her legs not responding properly to their masters commands. Damn it, just what was that knife coated with? Flandre gasped as the meteor came crashing back to earth because she realized in one panicked soaked second that she wasn't going to make it in time, that she was just a few steps away from salvation and that the difference between one step or a hundred wouldn't matter if she was crushed either way. So she spread her wings and

gave herself a gentle push of multicoloured thrust which pushed her off her feet in a sparkle of rainbows and out of the way as the massive slab of stone slammed down hard behind her, crashing through the treasure room flooring and falling into the darkness below as it collapsed floor after floor under its immense weight. Crash! Crash! Crash! Flandre landed into a roll, skidding painfully across the ground until her wings dug into the stone, gradually slowing her to a stop.

The scarlet sister rose tentatively to her feet, unsure of herself. God, what I wouldn't give for a sip of lifeblood right about now! Just a little bit, please? The collapsed section of flooring loomed down into the depths of the castle, resembling a giant gaping maw hungry for food or waiting for anyone foolish enough to venture too close. Flandre was thankful that she had just barely escaped the menu. The heavy, rhythmic pounding of metal boots filled her ears once again as the remaining knight began its singled minded mission to kill all intruders. At least she had weakened it from the looks of things. She couldn't remember what had happened during the 'incident' as Remilia polity referred to them but the evidence was all around her, ready to fill in the gaps in her memory. Like fragments of the past waiting to be discovered. The knight groaned and creaked as it pulled its damaged elephantine form one ponderous step at a time. It moved slower thanks to the fact that huge strips of metal have been torn away from its legs plus one of his feet had been mangled into a mismatch of twisted steal. Ominous green light glimmered out from the holes, revealing the glowing ruins within that must give it life. The rest of his body was similarly damaged with tears and scorch burns marking him as a rare survivor of Flandre's rage. Well, we'll soon see to that. If I wasn't sick to my stomach I probably would be enjoying myself instead of wanting to drop dead on the spot.

A distant part of her tortured mind wondered what had happened to his twin, dead hopefully but she had no time to think now as the knight raised his mighty spiked mace and charged across the room, his thunderous steps slamming into the already weakened flooring. His mangled foot acting like a printing press as it pounded a circular

hole with each step it took. A beginnings of an idea slowly formed in Flandre's mind, pushing away some of the mental clouds but she had more immediate concerns to deal with at the moment and so reluctantly straightened up her stance and shook her head, blonde strands of hair flowing around her as she tried to convince herself not to throw up again. She snarled, her eyes glowing a little more fiercely than before as her anger and determination helped the vampire to focus. The spiked mace loomed over her, raised high above the charging knights head. Where would it fall? Would he swipe at me or would it come crashing downwards atop of me? Meiling would have known, she had always been much better at reading body language than me. The mace seemed to blur and split into three before returning into itself. Magic? No. Flandre blinked, her vision was still muddled and was playing tricks on her at the worst possible time.

Trying to guess the attacks path was pointless. After all, dictating the pace of a fight always helped to put you in control! "Here I come giant!" she shouted, as much to keep herself awake as anything else and leapt forwards into a run just before the charging knight reached striking distance. The knight faulted at this unexpected move and was caught off balance as it swung its mace upwards in a deadly arc, trying to bat the vampire away but Flandre had already passed the clumsy blow and moved under its legs. A sudden great whoosh of wind brushed against Flandre from the mace's upswing and was strong enough to make her stumble. She waved her arms uncertainly and managed to right herself before her manic run propelled her face first into the ground. She cursed her misfortune and targeted one of the damaged areas on the knights left leg, summoning multiple crimson lances that slammed into the weakened magical metals with red hot energy flashes, bathing the room in a hellish light. Targeting the weakened areas made up for her own weakened state and she was rewarded with the hair raising sound of melting, twisting metal and the horrible paint stripping corrosive stench that accompanied it. She wrinkled her nose in disgust but still managed a little grin as she ran between the hulking giants legs before the knights leg creaked and gave way under the immense



weight that it could no longer support. With one leg sheered off at the knee by the intense heat, the knight collapsed with an ear splitting crash, kicking up dust, brick and stone across the entire treasure room.

It trashed its remaining limbs like a child throwing a tantrum, flailing about madly as it tilted its great helm and green eyes upon Flandre. If it could wish me dead I'm sure it would try. Flandre didn't feel like finishing it off even as it started to claw its way towards her with one hand, pulling its heavy body along the floor in a shower of sparks. All she wanted to do was find some antidote or something. Ah, if only Patchouli was here. Flandre was starting to appreciate being taken care of in her sheltered lifestyle a little bit more than she had before. She was sure that a little, no, a lot of blood would work wonders in order to cure her ailments. No sooner had the vampire started for the nearest exit, (which was a massive hole in the wall instead of a door) a certain fairy emerged from the gloomy depths wearing a panicked and searching expression on her face. When Cirno saw Flandre she beamed a smile that could melt ice and ran towards her chanting how happy she was to find her. "H-hey, wait-" Flandre began in a hoarse voice before Cirno leapt forwards and wrapped her arms tightly around her friend's waist. "I'm so glad I found you Flandre! The bad guys are going to be searching this place soon and I was worried they might find you before I did!"

Flandre's tired body winced at the passionate embrace but she didn't push the fairy away. She felt so tired and worn out that a little heartfelt affection would do her the world of good, even if her body was still a little frosty. She closed her eyes and imagined that it was sister hugging her like she used to, before coming to Gensokyo and before she became the lady of the manor. Remilia had grown more distant and acted a lot more formal when she had an image to maintain as the elegant and proper head of a household. They had been much more closely knit when it had just been the two of them, two sisters united who shared a bond closer than anything she had ever known. She did adore the other residents of the scarlet devil mansion but it wasn't the same. She opened her eyes and saw the

mass of chilly blue hair pressing against her like a sea urchin and remembered that it was Cirno who had come back for her when it would have been far simpler to have just left her behind and escaped. This fairy was genuinely worried about me. That, or she enjoyed danger just as much as I did. Flandre smiled and suspected it was a mixture of both.

Cirno pulled away from her and felt something wet and sticky on her hands. It was blood with a dark looking tint to it. "What's this?" Cirno gasped, spinning Flandre around to look at her back despite the protests from the vampire's stomach grumbling as she was manhandled like a toy. Flandre moaned something along the lines of 'Not so rough' but Cirno didn't hear her, her entire focus concentrated on the wound just under Flandre's wings where Claudette had cruelly stabbed her with a poisoned weapon. It wasn't much of a problem, just a shallow cut that had already begun to nit together with the accelerated healing that was just one of the benefits of being a vampire. "We have to get you to a doctor," said Cirno, panicked concern awash on her face before shacking her head and gripping Flandre's shoulders with a determined strength that someone of her small frame shouldn't possibly possess. "No, no one will help us here. We need to find some bandages or something." She reached for Flandre's dress, her flexing fingers intent on ripping the expensive fabric apart. Flandre held out a restraining hand that shook despite her best efforts. "L-leave my dress alone Cirno. My wound isn't serious and will heal by itself. I just need some blood to flush this horrid poison out of my system." She looked at Cirno with an earnest look, slightly embarrassed to open up her feelings like this but felt like the fairy had earned some honesty and wouldn't laugh at her. "And maybe a shoulder to rest on?"

Cirno took a step backwards, raising her arms across her body as if to ward off some vengeful evil spirit. "I'm not giving you any of my b-b-blood!" she stammered, consumed by some deep seated fear. "Its my blood and I need every single drop!" Flandre stared at the fairy wide eyed before sighing and shacking her head tiredly. She felt to drained for this and waved Cirno over. "Just take my shoulder and

stop acting dumb. I'm not interested in your freezing cold blood. It would probably freeze my heart stone cold." Cirno puffed up her chest and let out an infuriated breath. "My blood is like a well chilled wine!" she said, clearly reaching before adding in a low voice. "Probably. I haven't tried it..." Cirno then noticed the steady unpleasant sound of tortured stone against metal and glanced over Flandre to gaze in surprise at the giant suit of armour dragging its crippled bulk across the flooring towards them. The treasure room was vast and it wasn't anywhere near within striking distance but Cirno looked worried all the same, the intimidating green eyes completely new to her. Flandre followed her glance and shook her head dismissively. "Don't worry about him. He hasn't a leg to stand on."

After a little while Cirno remembered that time was of the essence and so rested Flandre's arm over her shoulder without any further complaints and supported her as they moved out of the treasure room. Cirno floated above the ground with her cargo wrapped around her so that Flandre only had to exert her exhausted self to the barest minimum to stay afloat. From the front Cirno looked like she had some wired combination of icy and crystal wings. Cirno's skin was cold but the thumping of her heart was relaxing and soon Flandre was blissfully resting her head against the fairy's shoulder, no longer caring about her independent image. Her keen senses were still alert enough for her to feel the fresh blood flowing through the fairy's neck as she bobbed up and down alongside her. Her mouth pursed open while her fangs extended slightly on pure instinct but she pushed the almost ridiculous notion of biting Cirno aside. Stupid body betraying me! I'd never do something like that. A cruel joke flashed across her mind but she felt too burnt out to pretend that she was going to bite Cirno. Besides, she might drop her considering her obvious phobia and she felt far too relaxed to deal with that eventuality.

As the two navigated the curiously empty ruined passageways Cirno told Flandre about everything she had overheard and why she had been so frantic to find her before the area became flooded with

guards. The vampire quietly listen to the tail while resting against her cool shoulder. So, Flandre thought venomously, the elusive thief has shown up again. It couldn't have taken Cirno all that long to find me so I might still be in with a chance if I can recharge myself quickly enough and find out where the masters wing is. Flandre sighed inwardly. That would all take too much time and Claudette wasn't likely to wait around in one place for too long. That damn thief had stolen her bag and its contents but that might be Flandre's one saving grace. It had been in her possession for a long time and smelled faintly of blood, her and the scarlet devil mansion. Plus inside was her beloved blood bottle, whatever the sunstone was plus some other provisions that she had stored away. She was confident that as soon as she was back to full health that tracking the bag down would be a piece of cake for her inhuman senses.

The castle seemed to have been struck into near eternal darkness with almost all of the lamps and fires having been extinguished during Flandre's disastrous outburst. Cirno wanted to light their way but Flandre murmured that it would give themselves away so she reluctantly forced one gleaming red eye half open to help guide them. Up ahead was a collapsed archway that had completely blocked off the passageway ahead so the two were forced to float off down one of the many intersecting corridors behind them. Neither of them really knew where they were going. When Flandre asked why Cirno couldn't remember the path she had taken only moments before, the fairy innocently replied that she had been too worried about her to remember small details like that. "Humph," Flandre mumbled, struggling for the right words. She couldn't say anything bad after that and she was suddenly very glad that her head was resting out of Cirno's sight. Her cheeks were blushing a fierce shade of beet red. After the duos failure to navigate the maze of dank and dreary corridors they began to hear voices up ahead. "What's that?" asked Cirno, straining her eyes to look into the near impenetrable gloom.

"Keep your voice down and listen," hushed Flandre. Cirno snorted at the slight but didn't say another word, merely settling for sticking her

tongue out. Flandre wondered if Cirno had forgotten about her night vision or just didn't care but now was not the time to find out. Up ahead the darkness was pushed away by some as of yet unseen light source like a holy relic driving away the unworthy shadows. The voices continued to grow louder as their owners approached, the tone of voice suggesting that they were apparently in no hurry. Good, so they hadn't been detected despite Cirno's best efforts. Flandre indicated a side passage on the left hand side of the corridor and silently made her way over to it, disappearing from sight in a heartbeat. Her shoes made a barely noticeable click as she did so and she cursed under her breath. She would never have been so sloppy normally had she not been under the mind numbing effects of the poison. Taking a moment to steady herself after a brief spell of dizziness, Flandre listened intently to the sounds around her, closing her eyes so her cloudy mind could paint a better picture. Nothing alerted her that the side passage was occupied for which she was grateful and the sounds of voices echoing down the corridor were becoming louder as they approached. The lack of footsteps was curious but walking wasn't the only way of traveling in Gensokyo.

The only other sound she heard was Cirno stumbling about like she was drunk or something. Flandre let out a deep breath and pushed herself off the wall she was leaning against and willed her aching limbs to allow her to glance around the corner to see what the hell was going on. Cirno had her arms outstretched and was feeling around in the darkness like a blind person would with a stick. She mumbled Flandre's name faintly, not wanting to raise her voice as her arms flailed around, trying to find her bearings. The little icy fairy's hand had found the wall and she hugged it tightly, following its length towards the side passage. Evidently a fairy's night vision wasn't equal to the masters of the night. The voices were almost upon them now so Flandre ducked out of her refuge, grabbed Cirno's fumbling hand and yanked her off her feet inside the side passage before the icy fairy could even let out a gasp. The vampire's eyes could see that Cirno was about to scream so she clamped a hand tightly around her mouth, holding down the flurry of panicked mumbling that followed. "Sssshhhhhhh!" Flandre hushed, "Its just m-

owwwww!" she yelped as Cirno bit her hand. The vampire yanked her stinging hand back, the bite momentarily knocking her out of her terrible nausea.

"Its me Flandre!" she snarled and slapped the back of Cirno's head in annoyance. It was the fairy's turn to yelp this time and Flandre flinched, expecting another bite from the rabid fairy. Instead the side passage was flooded with warm light as a trio of mages floating on magical currents of power stared at the two fighting figures with curiosity which quickly changed into recognition as those with staffs raised them while others began chanting otherworldly words. Flandre shouted a warning as best as she could managed before her wings flapped once, sending her swooping up near the ceiling. Cirno was still rubbing her head with a scornful look on her face so when the enemies appeared she had the perfect outlet for her anger. Her cold blue wings propelled her in the same manner as Flandre only towards the mages and not away from them. Spinning red and orange creations of magic zoomed under her, exploding into stunning displays of vibrant colors. Cirno landed on the leading magic users shoulders, a short looking man with thinning hair and clamped her body tightly over his face, banging him frantically with her fists. The man yelled something that was muffled by the squirmed fairy covering his face and tried to pull Cirno off of him but the fairy would not be defeated and pummeled him until he fell to the floor in a heap, his concentration holding him up in midair completely broken.

Flandre was perched up against the side of the wall, hanging off of it with one set of sharp claws dug into the stone. She took careful aim with her trademark finger shots like a sniper hiding from the rafters but her hand wasn't completely steady so her bright yellow energy beams rushed past their intended targets. Her enemies followed the trail of fading luminescence to find her position and fired backed their own response which took the form of a dragons head made up of raging blue and purple fire. Flandre fell from her perch just as the dragons head smashed into the wall in a shower of dust, snapping its fiery jaws as it reared its flaming head around to follow its prey's

decent. One of the mage's, a rather repulsive looking Youkai with a long drooping mouth big enough to fit her entire head into stepped forward to catch Flandre out as she landed while the more normal looking female magic user turned to help her fellow with the manic fairy hammering his head. Wide mouth mage gave out a distorted cackle and drove the tip of his staff into the ground. Pulsating green tentacles pushed through the stone flooring and shot towards Flandre, reaching out to ensnare the vampire so that the dragonhead could do its nasty work.

While that was happening, at the same time Cirno continued her relentless assault on the man who had dropped his staff in the confusion. The two figures were locked together as they rolled around together on the floor in a disorganized brawl, the much smaller fairy was giving the mage a solid pummeling with kicks and slaps and insults as she clung onto him with the force of a limpet clinging onto the hull of a ship. His arms were still fruitlessly trying to wrestle the troublesome fairy off of him but the magic user wasn't used to lifting a finger and would have considered running a single mile a terrible form of torture. "Stupid idiots! Stop trying to kill us!" snapped Cirno as her victim moaned pathetically for help. The female mage had turned to help her comrade and reached down towards the fairy's back, her hand glowing with a strange flickering blackness that made her blue robes flutter in the complete absence of wind. Cirno took a second from her ferocious assault to glance up at the potential danger and frowned that this nobody of a woman would have the gall to interrupt her fight.

She released her hold on the man and scrambled on her hands and knees between her legs before snapping her head around and biting deeply into the back of her leg through the blue cloth robes. "Ahhhhh!" she screamed in a high pitched voice, her balance faltering as the pain coursed through her. Her legs buckled and so too did her hand that had been reaching downwards. She yelped as she was no longer able to hold herself back and came into contact with her fellow mage who screamed as the twisting darkness snaked across his body like a giant octopus while multiple needles morphed

across the black as night tendrils which stabbed downwards, puncturing his flesh until he resembled a pin cushion. Cirno was too busy to hear the mans pitiful dying howls, tasked as she was in grappling the lady mage to the ground. She released her mouth and spat out a collection of fabric and old strands of hair. Her cheeks paled and she fought back a retch, blood rushing to her head. "Don't you wash your clothes?" she spat and pulled down the mage's gown with a grin to reveal a rather fetching pair of black painties and matching garter belt. Cirno whistled mockingly and reached up to pull the black panites down, grabbing the waistband and yanking downwards. The mage yelped and was forced to grasp her panties with both hands so a tug of war developed between the two until the mage remembered that the dark magics were still swirling around her hand.

She didn't have any time to think at all so her body acted on almost pure instinct and feeling, bypassing Flandre's buzzing mind completely so that for one small instance she was acting at her full potential, her natural fighting senses taking over. The leading tendrils were cut into green ropy ribbons as Flandre slashed them to pieces with her extended claws before they could lay their sticky hands on her but many more tentacles followed and she couldn't cut them all down before they engulfed her in a sea of living green. So as the net of tendrils came crashing down on her from above and below Flandre jumped to the side and started to run across the wall, defying gravity with a smirk as the flaming dragonhead opened its maw in a soundless roar as it slammed into the ground and continued after the vampire, eating into the green mass of tentacles as it did so. The droopy Youkai's law dropped even further than normal if that was possible as Flandre launched herself off the wall to land behind him. Droopy turned to face her, snarling that he was being made a fool of by this little girl. His pointed his staff at Flandre, swirling red magics forming at the tip that seemed to yearn for release. Flandre was still wearing her grin from earlier and seemed totally unfazed at the staff pointing directly at her because she hadn't forgotten about the whirlpool of blue and purple fire manifested in the



form of a dragonhead that still raged after her with its jaws snapping threateningly.

Droopy mage looked puzzled for all but a second at Flandre's relaxed attitude before he realized what the vampire already knew. For a moment that seemed frozen in time he grimaced, his shoulders slumping in defeat and then the flaming dragonhead snapped its jaws around him, cutting into his flesh with twenty burning daggers of teeth before the wild magical flames engulfed him and exploded, turning him into a human sized candle of flashing sea blue with currents of purple. Flandre jumped backwards and covered her face with both arms as charred pieces of meat were flung out along with burning fragments of cloth. The smell was rancid and in her weary state she fought the urge to throw up. She quickly backed away and turned, running towards Cirno. Her little adrenaline rush had completely run out and brought her crashing down to earth with the force of a sledgehammer. Her legs faulted and she dropped to one knee, her vision fading and mind seemingly on fire as she looked up to try and see Cirno. For some reason it looked like the mischievous ice fairy was sitting on top of a lady that had been stripped down to her undergarments.

Flandre wiped the sweat off her forehead and wondered if she was starting to suffer from hallucinations. How far gone am I? Will I ever feel normal again? There's only one thing I can do now. "Please, I give up, I give up!" whimpered the mage as Cirno sat, straddling her in triumph as she laughed in delight at the mage's plight. She slapped her captive's tummy playfully, producing a sharp yelp from her lips. Both her victims' hands had been encased in ice and her clothing lay scattered around the two figures for some odd reason. Flandre didn't care to ask and pushed herself forwards, her fangs extending and her pulse quickening at the promise of blood. She let out a deep yearning breath and forced herself to speak, almost having to push the words out of her desert dry mouth. "C-cirno, hold that woman up for me," she said hoarsely. Cirno blinked and looked around, confused. "Huh?"

Flandre let out an exacerbated breath and clumsily stumbled behind the mage, held her neck up and without another word plunged her fangs into her neck with obvious relish. Cirno winced as blood trailed down soft flesh right in front of her eyes and recoiled back, holding up a hand. "At least warn me before you do something like that." Flandre didn't listen at all, too caught up in the moment of feeding. Her throat bobbed up and down as the oxygen rich lifeblood flowed freely from veins into her own body, pushing away the cloudiness and fatigue and revitalizing her. When she was done she felt utterly reborn, like she had a new lease on life and in many ways that was exactly what she had received. "Lets get out of here! Lets get out of here!" Cirno kept repeating. "Why won't you listen to me?" Flandre blinked, wondering what was wrong with her. I guess I kinda spaced out, caught up in the moment. Flandre saw what was making Cirno so uncomfortable. It was the two dead bodies. Well one complete body pin pricked a thousand times by black barbs and one blown into pieces. The vampire wiped her mouth and rose to her feet. "Fine, lets go. Don't be such a big baby!"

## Cold trail

Cirno crouched low like a coiled spring full of barely suppressed energy while on the other side of the richly decorated oaken door, Flandre waited passively, sniffing the air and listening intently. "Well?" Cirno whispered, obviously itching to barge through the doors to see what the master's private study looked like. Flandre waved a hand for silence while her other hand extended three fingers to signal that there were three distinct lifeforms waiting on the other side. They smelled humanoid in nature, but seeing was believing. Cirno's brow furrowed as she tried to interpret her friend's hand signal before nodding her agreement with a grin. The fairy rose upwards slightly, tensing herself up in readiness. Flandre did likewise. It had been surprisingly easy to find the master's quarters and then, by extension, the master's private room itself. The fairy and vampire intruders had cornered the first maid they had come across, intending to learn the location of their objective and scared her so thoroughly, she had immediately passed out from shock. Flandre, who had honed the art of scaring maids to perfection during her time roaming the hallways in the Scarlet Devil Mansion, had presented her best bloodcurdling look complete with long, sharp fangs, claws, and burning red eyes. Evidently, it had been much too scary for the poor maid's heart to handle.

Cirno had laughed at the result, flashing Flandre a smug glance until the vampire had grown annoyed at the ridicule and used Cirno's complacency to sneak up behind her and give her a good-natured scare. Having learned a hard lesson, they didn't make the same mistake with the next person. Flandre's idea had been to place Cirno in full vision to make sure that they didn't pass out. Her reasoning (which she took great satisfaction in explaining to Cirno) was that they couldn't possibly faint in the presence of a fairy. Who would allow themselves to be intimidated by Gensokyo's jokers? Cirno had fumed at that but the look on her face had been well worth it. Besides the brief joking around, they made good time throughout the castle, hot on the heels of the thief that had poisoned Flandre and

stolen her favorite bag, not to mention using the two of them as bait. Flandre carried the guard like a bag of groceries underneath her as she flew, one set of talons dug into the back of his chain mail. He bobbed and jiggled all over the place, dangling below the vampire express like a shopping bag. He certainly wasn't enjoying the ride but all it took was one harsh look from Flandre's deep red glowing eyes to quell any ideas of revolt he might be harboring.

And so, he guided them to the master's wing, that is until Flandre mistakenly banged his head on a pillar. Thankfully, by that time, they had already progressed far enough to find the way by themselves. She stole a glance at his prone form from her crouching position by the oaken door. He was resting silently by the pillar that was now sporting a large crater in its center and fought down the urge to feel pity for him at this critical moment. It had been an honest accident as she had tried to explain to Cirno. The fairy had reluctantly nodded her agreement, but Flandre wasn't convinced of Cirno's conviction. Particularly when she gave Flandre a funny look, raising her eyebrows as she heard the explanation. *Well, believe what you want. Most of the guards about here seem hard-headed anyway.*

Three seconds after Flandre gave the hand signal, Cirno suddenly sprung up and launched herself like a blue comet, crashing through the heavy oaken doors shouting "Everybody FREEZE!" Flandre gasped in surprise as the giant wooden doors rebounded backwards on their hinges and she narrowly managed to throw herself to one side as they slammed into the wall with a heavy smack. Cirno charged into the master's private study as frosty ice crystals formed in the air surrounding her, producing a blue glittering aura around her as she scanned the area for targets. Two guards turned in surprise and drew their swords while a maid clutched her chest in fear as her legs gave out and she collapsed to the floor. The ice crystals expanded, doubling in size in a second as they instantly adsorbed water particles hanging in the air. Cirno swiftly directed them towards her opponents with an extended finger. The taller guard that had been next to a wall slashed out with his sword, fierce flames dancing around his blade. His stubble covered mouth twisted into a grin as

the first few crystals were sliced cleanly in half, the two pieces evaporating as the heated silver sword came into contact with them. At the same time, the second guard had maneuvered around Cirno who had barged right into the center of the study in an effort to encircle her. "Hmph!" Cirno grunted and turned her excited attention to mister stubble who had slashed another pair of crystals to nothingness as he carefully advanced.

"Slash this!" Cirno exclaimed as the icy crystals burst into liquid rain that washed all over the swordsman before hardening like magical concrete. "Urgh," he grunted, trying in vain to twist his sword arm free to hack at the advancing ice that grew around him like ivy. It was a fruitless effort. Cirno grinned and turned to face the remaining threat only to find Flandre clutching the man's face while suspending his entire body in midair, holding the limp, twitching form with apparent effortlessness. His sword lay on the floor, its shining surface unblemished with blood. Flandre dropped her victim to the ground. He fell like a puppet with its strings cut. "Is he...?" Cirno began to ask.

"Dead?" Flandre finished, raising an eyebrow and shaking her head with mild irritation. Why does she always assume the worst about me? "Don't be silly. I wouldn't dirty my clothes with such a small fry," she remarked in an attempt to emulate her sisters haughty tone before slapping her hands on her hips accusingly and leaning forwards. "Besides, didn't you understand my signal? Three lifeforms! It was three guards, or whatever! Not three seconds, you silly fairy! You almost crushed me to death! I'm sure that's not the first time you've almost killed me tonight!"

Cirno huffed loudly, puffing her chest up. "Well maybe having a door smack into your face would've been an improvement! Blood sucker! Naaawwwwww!" snapped Cirno, rolling her eyes and sticking out her tongue for maximum insult potential.

"Hmph! You wouldn't last a day under Sakuya's supervision!" retorted Flandre, feeling her face flush red as the beginnings of a mighty tantrum stirred within her chest. She fought down the urge

with practiced effort. She could be tolerant if she wanted to be, depending on who it was that was talking to her and what frame of mind she was in. She wouldn't allow herself to be baited from the words of a little fairy so she simply shrugged, reminding herself that it was all in good spirits and indicated Cirno's frozen catch. "Besides, it looks like your cold touch is suffocating that poor unfortunate cretin over there. And you're the one worried that I killed someone?"

"What are you... ." Cirno began before she followed the smirking vampire's outstretched finger to see that the ice curtain had completely enveloped the mans face and mouth. Muffled cries of desperation were just about audible through the hardened snowy mask and his panicked and pleading eyes could be clearly seen darting back and forth beneath the thin layer of clear ice. Just like someone who had become trapped under a glazed over lake in winter, Flandre mused. Cirno gasped, her wings glowing with an aquamarine shine as she frantically flew over to him and removed a section of the ice with a sharp swipe of the hand. He gasped desperately, sucking in huge lungfuls of air while coughing up mushy ice blobs that he had swallowed. He seemed to be pulling through as some sense of color returned to his deathly pale face. *Why she bothered trying to save him in the first place is beyond me. I guess she's just a carefree little fairy at heart and that's one of the reasons why I like her, but she can be a bit soft and naive sometimes. I need to look out for her, it seems.*

Flandre smiled to herself. She was meant to be the fish out of water here, not Cirno, who had, after all, been surviving in the outside world for heaven knows how long. Maybe there was something that she wasn't seeing in the little tenacious fairy's demeanor. The vampire took this relatively quiet moment to truly take in the majesty of her surroundings. The master's private quarters were as large and wide as a small house and, unlike the dank and dreary castle, this room was furnished with bright warm colors. Rich looking ornaments lined rows and rows of shelves over and around a burning obsidian fireplace that cast strange shadows across the vast expanse. An

impressively large furry animal hide lay on the floor, reduced to nothing more than a common rug.

Despite the warm fire, it was still surprisingly cold with a strong breeze coming in from somewhere. A large, expensive looking grandfather clock filled her ears with a constant tick-tick-tick as the solid gold pendulum swung side to side as it had done so for probably hundreds of years. Flandre explored aimlessly for a while before picking up a heavy looking book off a nearby table, pushing a weird lightning bolt shaped dagger off its covers. "Wearnors hern dispola" she said, reciting the book's title with a little difficulty. *It just rolls right off the tongue doesn't it. I bet Patchouli would know what this is.* Flandre began thumbing through the pages. As she did so her crimson eyes began to glaze over. Boring diagrams and unknown words filled her vision and she chuckled the tome dismissively to the floor.

Flandre paused, trying to filter out the fairy's hyperactive ravings as she sniffed the air with sudden interest. The fetid scent betrayed the location of someone else that had been keeping very quiet and still since they had entered the room. Hiding won't work against me, silly. I could sniff a fairy out in a rose garden if I had too. Flandre smiled, remembering the gardener Eolande's screams but shook her head and returned to the task at hand. She turned her neck towards the large desk that dominated the back of the room, flanked by two fancily decorated suits of armour. Thankfully, these two suits were just normal-looking human-sized armours gripping a sword pommel between their hands for decoration. They didn't seem remarkable in any way and for that Flandre was thankful, but even so, she eyed them skeptically as she tentatively approached the desk. Behind it, stained-glass windows surrounded it in a small alcove. They unsurprisingly depicted knights engaged in battle against demonic forces. How ordinary. It was enough to make the young vampire yawn until she felt a chill crawl up her spine. She shivered involuntarily. One of the stain glass windows had been shattered, the colourful glass shards reflecting faint rainbow light as the firelight hit it. They reminded Flandre of her own wings and the way they soaked

in and reflected light when she wasn't sneaking around. *Sister once hung decorations from them while laughing and dancing around me. She called me a Christmas tree. After that we had a snowball fight and gave each other simple handmade presents. We didn't have the mansion at the time.*

The snowstorm was still raging outside as fiercely as ever. The white curtains billowed wildly as the howling wind wailed like an angry banshee battering against the castle walls, looking for any weaknesses in its structure. Already a pile of snow had formed beneath the broken window frame as more of the flurry floated into the room on frozen currents of wind. The maid was still sprawled on the carpet, unconscious judging by the faint beat of her heart. An open box filled with various potions, jars and syringes lay overturned next to her; some of the containers liquid was seeping into the fabric, staining the red carpet a sick looking green shade. As she neared the desk, she pinpointed that the scent was coming from a gaudy looking red padded swivel chair that was currently facing away from her, hiding its motionless occupant from sight. An arm hung limply over the side, covered in old looking waxy skin with a couple of golden rings on its fingers. It didn't move as Flandre carefully peered around the chair, moving soundlessly on the balls of her feet. The old man seated before her was wearing a puffy purple fur coat over a red doublet with an exquisite looking necklace across his neck. He seemed alive but just barely.

Taking care to avoid stepping on the sharp reflective shards of glass embedded in the carpet, Flandre crept forwards and leaned in for a closer look. The man was breathing ragged short breaths, his lungs desperately grasping for every shred of oxygen possible as if there was suddenly a limited supply. His eyes were clasped firmly shut. He seemed to be unconscious, but his eyelids were flickering like he was caught up in some nightmare he couldn't escape. *Was the doctors kit meant for him? Was he the master of the castle?* It seemed likely. She could smell dried blood faintly in the chilly air but couldn't see any obvious wounds. Her nose twitched. *What's with that rancid odor? Seems familiar somehow.* A spark of red flared in



Flandre's eyes as she spotted something. There, on the neck! A small razor thin cut had been hiding on the other side of his neck. Flandre leaned even closer to get a better look, trying to ignore the floating snow settling on her blonde crown of hair. No wonder it had been overlooked, the wound was so tiny but at the same time broad across. Some kind of narrow needle like knife?

The excitement and overflowing euphoria she usually felt went presented with an undefended neck full of lifeblood was spoiled by that irritatingly toxic substance hanging in the air. She took in a little speculative sniff and immediately yanked her head back as the noxious fumes enveloped her nostrils. She shook her head and snorted repeatedly to drive the eye watering substance from her body. "What's going on?" asked Cirno, who had apparently lost interest in whatever she had been doing before. "Who's the old geezer? Hey, are you alright?" Flandre rubbed her eyes, she felt like someone had thrown a container of pepper over her face.

"I-I'm fine. The old m-man was poisoned and I inhaled some of it. Must hav-Achhhooooo!" She sneezed suddenly which seemed to help clear up her tortured nose somewhat and let out a small sigh. "Must have been some of Claudette's poison. It seems to be one of the bitch's calling cards and we know she was last seen in this area. When I get my hands on-" She paused when she noticed that Cirno was now wearing a small silver tiara inlaid with diamonds, rubies and several other peculiar gems that could only be found in Gensokyo. Various slender bracelets and rings adorned her fingers and wrists. *Here I was investigating and all the fairy can do is mess around.*

"Oh these?" asked Cirno innocently while doing a remarkably poor job of covering up her mischievous grin. "Just a few treasures I found hanging around." She posed, draping her arms around in an overly dramatic fashion like a drunk actress. Flandre scowled, her temper growing. "I've been investigating and all you can do is go looting?" In truth she was more annoyed that she hadn't ran into Claudette at all despite wading through the masters wing fruitlessly bumbling around for a reward that never came. She saw the icy

fairy's face twist into one of confused annoyance and realized that taking her anger out on Cirno wouldn't solve anything and might lose her the only friend she had made in what seemed like forever. This wasn't some fairy maid that would put up with her prickly nature because it was her job, after all.

Before Cirno could object and sulk in her usual childish manner Flandre mustered up her version of an apology. She waved a hand and looked to her side evasively. "Ummmmm, well. I like your jewelry. Where did you find it?" Cirno seemed to like the compliment and change of topic and positively beamed at the praise, her mood changing as rapidly as the wind.

"I found it in an old jewelry box. This room is filled to the brim with treasure and other stuff. Why, they have closets with more clothing than you could choose from in a lifetime and glowing things in glass displays. I'm going to try on some of the dresses. I hope they have something in blue my size." She was giddy like a kid in a candy store where everything was free and up for grabs.

Cirno squirmed on the spot like her body had been showered in itching powder. She glanced eagerly around at all the unopened chests and draws and just as Flandre began to mouth a response the little fairy could contain herself no longer and disappeared back into one of the giant walk in wardrobes that lined the back of the room in search of god knows what. Only the faintest tint of icy glitter in the air gave any clue that Cirno had been standing there just the faintest moment before.

*That fairy is as impulsive and excitable as a force of nature. Maybe that was her gift, like sister's gift for reading red lines of fate.* Flandre smiled, letting herself become swept up in her companions innocent glee. *Well, if she gets some treasure then I want some too!* That was one of the reasons for entering this castle after all. She proceeded to have a dig through an antique looking jewelry box carved in the likeness of a gaping lions head. She picked out a few items that took her fancy. A couple of beautifully decorated rings and a small golden chain necklace. One of the rings resembled one that sister owned,

with a shining red ruby implanted in its center and that was the reason she had chosen it. She felt a warmth envelop her heart as she slipped the ring over her finger, like part of Remilia was somehow watching over her.

Flandre gave the guard who was still encased in ice a menacing glance, baring her fangs in an angry hiss as she passed him to join Cirno in the wardrobe. The guard's face paled, the implied threat clear as day. Passing under the wardrobe's open doors transported her to a different world. One made up entirely of rows and ranks of clothing. Even the sky was clothing with multiple collections of ties and belts hanging downwards from spidery metal frames. Flandre found herself surrounded by fluffy fur coats, tastelessly over designed trousers, lavishly decorated hats and even a section dedicated to dresses and ball gowns. *Why would a man have so many dresses in his personal collection?* Flandre decided she didn't really want to know. Some questions were best left unanswered.

She could hear Cirno somewhere, hidden in the dense sea of fabric babbling something excitedly. Flandre heard her giggle again and suddenly felt like the fairy was hunting her and would dramatically burst out from somewhere to try and scare her. Like a shark swimming in a sea of cloth. Flandre shook her head and concentrated on finding a sufficiently pretty but practical dress to replace the now torn and tattered red number that had seen better days, courtesy of the treasure room adventure. *How funny. This will be my third dress of the night. Sakuya would have been beside herself if this had happened back at the mansion.* She tried on a few dresses before throwing them over her head in disgust. *Such tacky rags are not worthy of my youthful beauty.* She passed a mirror and pretended to not notice it. Not having a reflection in front of mirrors irritated her and having to dress in front of a shiny teapot or polished floor at home was much better than being reminded of that fact.

A few minutes passed and Flandre Scarlet emerged from the wardrobe like a butterfly ready for the first day of summer, flapping her dazzlingly colourful wings slowly to make the holes she'd had to

make in the back more comfortable. She had settled on a simple dress with short sleeves that boasted intertwined black lacing down the sides for decoration. Over that, she wore a deep blue leather jacket to help keep her body warm. Atop her blonde hair was a new hat that closely resembled the one she had lost. It felt good to have one again. She didn't feel fully clothed without one. Flandre closed her eyes and did a little private twirl, imagining herself as a great and well loved performer of some sort and jumped as she spied that Cirno had somehow beaten her out of the cupboard and now sat perched atop the desk, rocking her legs back and forth as she regarded the vampire quizzically. "Red again?" She asked, smirking. "Oh I get it," she added, folding her arms across her chest. "Because you're a vampire and vampires like blood!" Cirno chuckled to herself, rocking back and forth precariously near the edge of the desk.

Flandre's face reddened. Her lips were pouting in displeasure. *I hope you fall off the desk right onto your stupid face!*

"Hmph! I'll have you know that red is my favorite colour just like sister's, not just because I'm a vampire! Anyway, you're one to talk. Always wearing blue because you're an ice fairy. How original!" Cirno looked down at her own choice of a blue frilly blouse and short skirt and shrugged before straightening her tiara, the smirk never leaving her face. "I'm cute no matter what I wear so I don't have to put as much thought into it as you do. So there~!"

*Why you contemptuous fairy!* They argued like bickering children for a little while, each of them coming up with more inventive insults about the other's new choice in clothing as the slagging match continued. The guard watched the two go at it perplexed at how he had become imprisoned by these quarreling youngsters and tried his luck by gritting his teeth as he started straining against the ice binding him. After a monumental effort a portion of ice binding his arms behind his back audibly cracked which echoed around the room like someone pulling a Christmas cracker. It suddenly became dead silent as Cirno and Flandre stopped their juvenile spat and turned their heads to stare at the guard as he frantically tried to free

himself now that his gambit had been discovered. You could have heard a pin drop and fear was suddenly quite heavy in the air. "What do you think you're doing?" snarled Flandre, her monstrous looking fangs glinting in the firelight as she approached her cornered prisoner. Cirno grinned at the now terrified man, walking just behind Flandre with cold swirling energy surrounding her grasping hands.

"S-stay away from me!" he stammered, utterly terrified as Flandre slammed her hands down on the arm rests and stared into his face.

"Don't move!" she angrily shouted right into his face, spittle flying from her open mouth. Her two fangs looked like large stalactites hanging from a snapping cave full of sharp teeth.

A stabbing shard of ice now protruded from Cirno's hand which she slowly pushed closer to the guards trembling throat, all the while wearing that unnerving grin across her cold face. The man squirmed and tried to desperately pull his neck away from the sharp icy blade that reflected his own soon-to-be-cut flesh like a mirror. He mumbled a plea for mercy but most of it came out in sudden spurts. Instead Cirno reached past him and pushed the shard against the broken areas of his prison. The ice turned pulpy like snow and grew over his binds, repairing the shattered areas. "Just kidding," Cirno said, tapping him on the shoulder. "We wouldn't want you to hurt yourself."

Flandre still leaned over him, a frightening malicious leer on her face. She too put a hand on his other shoulder, but this cat had claws and she took great delight in his discomfort as her talons dug lightly into his flesh. She smiled and tightened her grip. "I'll hurt you, though, unless you explain what happened here and where that thief ended up." She rolled her tongue around her fangs, licking the bone suggestively while never relenting with her red gaze. "And if I don't like your answer, I might just forget my manners." *Now, lets see how far behind I am from my prey. We've wasted quite enough time here as it is.*

The guard was very cooperative and was practically stumbling over himself to appear as helpful as possible. Flandre had to slow down

his frantic babbling just to fully understand his words. As soon as he started to make actual sense, Flandre started to piece together what had happened and shift through to the parts that mattered. Claudette had infiltrated the master's wing while taking advantage of Flandre's destructive rampage and had proceeded to steal the castle's most valuable treasures besides the Pegasus Gem, which she had taken earlier. Still taking advantage of people, how very like Claudette. Flandre still remembered the swirling rainbow colours that radiated from the gem. It had left a pleasant imprint in her mind and had been one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen. The guard continued. One of the guards discovered a body hidden in shadows and immediately sounded the alarm. Soon after, they caught a confirmed sighting of Claudette and the order was sent down for Yumeko to return to the master's side to protect him and his treasures. She arrived just as the thief was ransacking the master's private chambers. Trapped like a rat, Claudette ran behind the master and held a small knife to his throat, warning everyone to leave or else.

Yumeko was hesitant to leave him and warned that she would hack and slash Claudette's arms and legs off one by one if anything should happen to the master. Claudette smiled at the threat and stabbed him anyway before jumping through the stain glass window behind the master's desk and disappearing into the billowing snowstorm. Yumeko stayed just long enough to arrange a specialist maid to try and stabilize the master and then launched herself into the night in hot pursuit. It had been about 20 minutes since these events had transpired, if the guard was to be believed, and Flandre had good reason to do so as she gazed into his terrified eyes and trembling lips. Cirno hadn't said a word for once. The fairy had been totally caught up in the tale and when it was finished she turned to Flandre and said "Lets get a move on! We can still catch up with them!" The vampire gave a brief smile and then nodded her agreement.

"Well, let's get a move on shall we?" she said, her wings glimmering with power as they lifted their owner off her feet before propelling her

towards the shattered stain glass window and the raging snowstorm beyond. Cirno followed closely behind and the two emerged surrounded by the castles various battlements, domes, and towers. All were covered in a thick sheet of snow. The night's air was bitterly cold and hurt Flandre's lungs slightly with each breath. Great gusts of wind battered the castle and anyone foolish enough to challenge its strength. Flandre and Cirno were both strong enough to fly in this white hell but it was hard going and the only safe spots from this relentless blizzard were behind towers and other large structures so the two Youkai stuck to these areas as much as possible.

Cirno had no trouble whatsoever in the harsh cold besides trying to keep her footing but Flandre absolutely hated it. An ice fairy she was sadly not. *Stupid blizzard! The weather had to pick the very night I have my adventure to randomly throw a hissyfit.* She saw Cirno overtake her. The fairy's six wings were glowing with an ethereal blue power surrounding them. Presumably that was how she navigated in the dark. "Hey, do you see anything?!" Flandre shouted, fighting to be heard over the battering snow-filled gales. Cirno didn't seem to hear her and so the vampire simply followed behind her, silently telling herself that this snowstorm couldn't possibly last forever. She was extremely confident with her tracking ability, after all, a vampires life depended on their ability to find humans but this storm was fiercer than she remembered. Sniffing the familiar scents of her own bag and Claudette's wounds would be extremely difficult if not impossible. Any footprints left in the snow would be immediately swallowed up by the hungry storm. *I can just about detect a faint trail in the air. Probably Yumeko and her party. If I follow them I should be able to find everything I'm looking for.* She grinned. Maybe if I'm lucky I'll be able to settle up with both of them! She flew up alongside Cirno while avoided the worst patches of snowfall and tugged at her arm, indicating the right course to follow with a stabbing finger. Cirno nodded and said something in return but it was lost in the raging wind currents that stole the words from her lips.

After what seemed like a lifetime of trekking past the gargantuan black towers and jagged walls of the castle while carefully avoiding any sentries and contending with the harsh winds that threatened to chill Flandre to the very bone they finally came to the edge of this strongholds hold on this land. Cirno flew down to the walkway overlooking the curtain wall and eagerly took in the sight of open country. "Whoa," she exclaimed as she saw what awaited them beyond the warm confines of the castle. A forest of trees stretched out as far as she could see before the horizon became engulfed in the billowing snowstorm that seemed to grow with raw ferocity with every passing moment. The trees struggled to stand upright in the wake of the withering wind currents that battered them relentlessly. What lay beyond that was cloaked in white mystery. Great mountains poked their heads out of the frosty mass of snow, the massive structures of rock completely covered from the neck down. Swallowed by the raging storm that they were about to willingly walk into. Flandre dropped down besides Cirno just as a sudden gust of wind full of flurry hammered the icy fairy in the face, forcing her to duck below the battlements. "Gahhh!" she gurgled, spitting out the cold fragments that had flown into her open mouth while checking that her prized tiara was still firmly in place atop her crest.

Flandre ducked beside her, looking left and right for any sign of approaching guards patrolling the curtain wall, but it seemed as if only they were brave enough to endure the hardships of winter. Satisfied they were truly alone, she pulled herself into a ball, arms folded around her body, and allowed herself to shiver. Her teeth clattered uncontrollably as the coldness penetrated her entire being. It felt as if the snowstorm could reach into her deepest depths to freeze her very soul. She steeled herself before another bout of shivering overtook her, not wanting to appear weak and leaned in close so that her voice would be heard over the roaring winds. "Claudette, Yumeko, and god knows what else await us somewhere in that snowstorm. Are you ready to track them down and give them a good beating?" she asked Cirno, keeping her jaws from chattering with a supreme mental effort and forcing a smile that she didn't feel.



Cirno nodded, excitable as ever. "Yeah, lets show them who's boss around here!" And with that, they left the castle behind them and entered the storm's embrace.

# Blizzard

Flandre slogged through the knee deep snow with dogged determination. Keeping herself moving and the blood flowing was the only thing keeping her from keeling over from frostbite and collapsing in the snow covered ground where the endless whiteness would no doubt claim her body. Swallowing up the vampire like some giant sentient force of nature feeding its insatiable hunger on this entire land. *Was it that far fetched? A storm that eats? The outside world made it seem like anything was possible.* Certainly the storm had claimed most of the greenery surrounding her.

Only the tall proud trees and a few large hedges popped their heads out from under winters all encompassing influence. Flandre shivered while her eyes tried in vain to pierce the carpet of billowing slush poring down from the heavens. Simply placing your next foot down in front of you could be a gamble in itself. Many a time she had almost tripped over a hidden rock and fallen face first into the deep bottomless snow. Flying was out of the question with these freezing biting winds chock full of icy fragments and snowballs as big as her own head so Flandre was forced to push herself through the slush one ponderous footstep at a time.

Flandre sighed and watched Cirno with envy as she prance around in the snow seemingly without a care in the world. The fairy waved her arms around in the air as snow and the occasional graceful snowflake floated down around her. The wind was blowing her bright blue hair all over the place but even in this intense gale Flandre detected a smile hiding among all those billowing blue strands. The vampires own expression was gloomy by comparison. Her lips were pursed together tightly to keep her teeth from chattering which had in the past caused her own fangs to painfully piece the inside of her mouth. Away from the castle Flandre had felt safe enough to use a little fire magic to help stave off the freezing cold, confident that it would no longer give her away. She drew her hands in closer to her body, enjoying the warmth it provided. Her hands were filled with a

flickering flame that danced between her fingers, the volatile magic trying to escape her grasp but Flandre wouldn't let the warmth leave her.

A shimmering energy barrier surrounded her that quivered slightly with a blue tint every time a large piece of snow flurry struck it but it did its job and kept the biting wind currents from turning her into one of Cirno's frozen statues. Without it, keeping a flame going would have been impossible but even with the field and the fires help, Flandre still felt miserably cold and her constant shivers only proved that fact. *Could vampires freeze to death? I certainly don't want to find out. Stupid weather. The one thing I can't do anything about.*

"Hey, lower that silly shield Flan!" shouted Cirno, fighting to be heard over the howling wind.

"The weather is great! Look at all the snow! Its a winter wonderland!" The icy fairy swept her arm around, encompassing the entire white hell like it was some kind of paradise before a sudden gust of chilly air almost knocked her off her feet. "Whoa!" she exclaimed, waving her arms for balance. *That would have been some nice poetic justice if Cirno didn't look like she was having the time of her life.* "You must be out of your mind to enjoy this! And my name is Flandre! Not Flan!" responded Flandre but her words were stolen by the snowstorm's constant wails as Cirno didn't seem to hear her as she continued her gleeful frolicking.

The two figures traveled on through the snowy wasteland, roughing it as best as they could manage. Flandre had never felt so small and alone in the face of nature. It was like she had entered a different plain of existence. Cirno was here of course but the relentless winds made it difficult to see more than a few meters in front of your face. The foreboding sense of loneliness that the snowstorm gave was almost soul crushing.

*Maybe this is purgatory? Maybe this is all an illusion? Just like under the lake.* She shivered and held the crackling fire in her hands a little closer to her chest, taking solace in the warming presence. The snow continued to batter against her energy field, trying to find a way

inside her relatively warm bubble. The constant pat pat pat of impacting slush combined with the overwhelming chill and howling winds made it hard for Flandre to concentrate but she tried her best to push everything negative out from her mind as sister had painstakingly taught her. She tried once again to sniff out that reprehensible thief Claudette's trail but was once again thwarted by the extreme climate.

The chilly wind and thigh deep snow was playing havoc with her prized vampire talents. She had been so utterly confident that she could track Claudette's trail with a practiced ease that came naturally to her but this snowstorm covered up tracks within seconds, blanketed out any lingering scents under heaps of snow and as if that wasn't enough, created a constant swirling white haze that blocked everything from view.

The best she could manage was to point them in the general direction that Claudette had taken and pray that she could sniff out another clue along the way. It had been quite a while since her last solid lead and the vampire was beginning to lose confidence but Flandre's pride hadn't allowed her to tell Cirno of her failings. Cirno was relying on her to navigate this withering blizzard as Flandre herself had so merrily boasted about how easy it would be for a vampire such as her so failure was not an option.

A vast stretch of water bared their path that had completely frozen over. Unwilling to risk falling into the bone chilling ice the traveling duo had elected to brave the howling wind currents and fly over it. Flandre hadn't relished the prospect at all and had nearly lost sight of Cirno among the fierce obscuring gale. When they had safely reached the other side of the frozen expanse they resumed travelling on foot. They passed a number of old trees that had lost their long battle with the vicious wind and had become violently uprooted, ripping up the earth so that the surrounding ground resembled a patchwork mixture of pallid white and muddy brown.

The surrounding hedges and trees were becoming larger and more dense as they progressed which helped with the weather by acting

as a natural wind break. Cirno skipped across the snow covered ground gleefully while Flandre continued to slog through the now knee deep snow growing more distant and miserable by the minute. *I hope this ends before my toes turn completely black and drop off.* They already felt a little numb and she didn't feel like testing the limits of her more than human body. The cold air was starting to make her eyes water a little and tiny tears had already frozen solid on her pale cheeks.

She hoped against hope that a broken branch or some fallen object embedded in the snow would give her something to follow, some sign she could use to steer them in the right direction. *Heh, I shouldn't be so naive to think that Claudette would leave such an obvious clue just laying about right in the open.* Flandre stopped walking suddenly and stared at the all encompassing snowstorm as it pelted against her flickering little blue bubble. She felt like the storm resented her sanctuary, that it wanted to snuff out the only patch of warmth in this cold and harsh land. That irritated her for some reason. She knew very well that it was just a mindless force of nature but even so it was causing her to suffer. That made her want to lash out at something. At anything. She pursed her lips together, a thought occurring to her.

Perhaps she could blast herself a nice and tidy corridor through the snowstorm that would last just long enough for them to travel through this particular area unhindered. It was better then blindly stumbling around aimlessly in this relentless vortex waiting for frostbite to stake its ugly claim over her. There was a chance that she may alert her prey as to her whereabouts but that was a risk she was willing to take at this point. After all, she wasn't going to catch up with anyone at this rate. She shivered again as her beloved flame twisted and flickered in her slender hands. "Hey Flan!" yelled Cirno as she jumped onto Flandre's energy bubble like someone would happily jump onto a beach ball. Cirno's cheek was pressed firmly against the clear surface as her body began to lose purchase and slowly slide down the frosty coating. "Wah!" Flandre yelped as she was suddenly knocked out of her trance.

"I thought I lost you," said Cirno before her weight combined with Flandre's momentary lapse of concentration began to collapse the shimmering energy field entirely. Flandre just had enough time to widen her red eyes with the realization of what was about to happen and utter the words "Cirno, you-" before her fluttering barrier blinked out of existence with a loud electrical snap and the whole swirling mass outside came crashing in. The scarlet vampire stumbled backwards and held up her arms as the strong icy wind currents stung her exposed skin and forced her backwards step by step. Too late she remembered the still burning fire in her hands. Flandre cursed and frantically pulled the flickering flame away from her face. In her blind panic she lost her footing and fell backwards into the carpet of snow with a soft thump. Cirno likewise fell into the snow, disappearing in a explosion of pale slush.

From Flandre's view the world had turned a bright shade of white, locked in as she was inside her little winter grave. To anyone with normal vision this situation would have left them in complete darkness but a vampires eyes instead gave Flandre the cold oppressive feeling of being trapped inside a freezing white prison even though she knew she could escape it any time she wished. The raging storm had wasted no time in applying a thin layer of soft snow over Flandre, some of which had fallen into her then gasping mouth. Her body temperature plummeted in those scant seconds. The tightly packed snow seemingly sucking the warmth from her very core. *This is the last straw! I not putting up with this anymore! I'm trying sister! I'm trying to be tolerant like you taught me but I'm cold, my feet hurt, my mouth is full of snow and this stupid annoying storm won't leave me alone!*

Cirno burst out the snow, chuckling innocently to herself at what had happened as she brushed herself down. As she sniggered the roaring winds funneled into her open mouth, causing her cheeks to wobble wildly. She clasped a hand over her mouth and ducked down low to avoid the worst of it and began to scan around the desolate landscape, looking for her lost friend. "Flan?" she called, then again louder. "Flandre? Where did you go?" Her blue fluffy hair waved

around briskly as she waited. To her left there was a faint tremor in the earth. She turned her head slowly in that direction just in time to see a loud, ear splitting explosion of glittering snow shoot up out of the ground. A fountain of white slush was flung out in all directions like a long dormant geyser finally erupting. A pair of colourful radiant wings were all that Cirno could make out hiding among the icy cloud of glittering snow fragments.

"Flandre?" Cirno asked hesitantly, taking a few tentative steps closer towards the swirling pale vapor mass. Then remembering to raise her voice in pitch in order to combat the howling winds she added "Hey, are you alright? Did you hit your head or something?" She could see Flandre's red glowing eyes now. They looked quite ominous floating as they were in midair, totally detached from their owner. If Cirno didn't know who they had belonged to she might have felt a shiver of fear at the sight. "I'm sick of this storm!" yelled Flandre which caused Cirno to recoil a little. Flandre's voice carried a certain vicious quality to it that definitively wasn't good. "Why doesn't it all just disappear?"

Cirno recognized this side of her. The outbursts that had been so clearly displayed in the castle still fresh in her mind. She decided to try and soothe things over. "Hey Flandre," she said, searching for the right words. "Don't worry about all this snow. It's just hardened water, see?" She smiled warmly and scooped up a handful of the chilly material before crushing it between her fingers. "So it's a little cold? We've faced stuff tougher than this stupid storm. Come over here with me and let's show this blizzard who's boss!" She beckoned the vampire over. There was a long silence that seemed to stretch for an uncomfortable amount of time in the icy fairy's opinion. Cirno fidgeted restlessly, wiping off some of the snow that had become embedded in her fringe. Maybe Flandre hadn't heard her over the wind?

Eventually Flandre spoke up, no longer yelling with unbridled raw emotion. Rather she sounded strangely forlorn all of a sudden, standing there motionless in the blustering freezing gale. "I'm sorry

Cirno. I can't sniff out anything in this snowstorm. I've been leading us aimlessly for ages now rather than admit that I've lost the trail." She piped up with a new sense of determination. "But don't worry! That's going to change right now. I'm not letting this piddling little squall get the better of me any longer! Get behind me Cirno, I'm going to blast us a clear path through!"

Cirno waved her hands and was about to protest but Flandre had already begun to glow brightly with steadily building power that sent heliotrope waves radiating off of her which started to melt the ice under her feet. Cirno had no choice but to frantically hurry over and get behind Flandre if she wanted any chance of escaping the blast zone. "I was enjoying the storm," she muttered to herself, letting out cloudy breath as she maneuvered herself to what she hoped would be a safe position. There she lay down face first in the slush and covered her ears while at the same time folding her icy wings downwards so that they wouldn't attract any strong currents. Her jaw rumbled as the tremors passed through her now prone body so she clamped it shut to avoid chattering her teeth to pieces.

"Just don't destroy too much Flan! I'm back here remember and others might be-" she began before Flandre unleashed a mighty cone of pure bright destruction that spanned the height and width of the scarlet devil mansions gatehouse. It devoured everything in its path and melted anything unfortunate enough to be around it. Trees were torn from their roots or outright obliterated into their component elements. The roaring of the blast drowned out the storms howling winds and Cirno flinched, doing her best to cover up her ears while also trying to maintain her purchase on the earth in the face of the powerful backlash. Wherever the hurtling energy went, the landscape was reduced to a smoldering crater. The roaring surge of lethality carried on on its course and was out of sight before it started to fizzle out and dissipate.

Flandre stood slightly hunched over, her arms hanging almost limply from her sides. Her chest was heaving up and down as she sucked in huge lungfuls of the frosty air. When she saw the full extent of



what she had done she smiled for the first time in forever and whooped and cheered at the payback she had enacted on this miserable excuse for weather. The snowfall that had been constantly bombarding them had been reduced to a trickle for the time being and a vast smoldering path had been dug into the earth that stretched further than the vampire could currently see. The bone chilling winds however came back almost immediately and Flandre cut short her jubilant celebrations as a series of shivers rocked her slender body. "This will do," she muttered, wrapping her arms tightly around her shacking torso.

Behind her, Cirno had been completely covered in a blanket of milky snow. Only her four wings protruded above the ground, giving any clue that she was there. They looked like sleeted periscopes with Cirno as the fairy submarine however unlike a submarine Cirno couldn't breath underwater. When the icy fairy had judged that it was safe enough she burst from her arctic hideaway and started gasping in air, her cold cheeks almost as blue as her aqua coloured hair. "F-Flandre," she said between deep breaths, walking towards her at times dangerous friend while coughing up some snow she had inadvertently swallowed. "Give... me... more... of a..warning next..time."

Flandre was crouching low, warming her nimble body up with a fire she had ignited. She tightened her jacket and cocked her head to one side quizzically. "Like you gave me a warning when you collapsed my energy field?" she said, spitefully. "Just because you enjoy freezing to death, doesn't mean that I do." Cirno spat out a final blob of pale white mush while tapping herself lightly on the back. She let out a long refreshing breath before she turned her blue gaze back to Flandre. "I don't understand you sometimes Flan. One time you're upset and then the next you seem annoyed. You seem bipolar," she said, expressing heavy emphasis on the phrase 'polar'.

*What is that fairy saying now? Using these strange words.* Flandre waved her arms around in a sweeping motion, encompassing the entire frozen landscape surrounding them. "Well I'm certainly not

going to feel happy now am I? Also of course I'm cold. I'm positively freezing. That's what you meant by bipolar right? The polar regions? Cold?" *I remember that from the human world at least.* "Oh," she added as an afterthought, "My name is Flandre! Flandre! Not Flan!"

Cirno smirked sardonically and shook her head, raising her voice slightly to be heard over the returning wind. "No silly. That's not what it means. Haven't you ever been to Keine's teaching classes? Its means that-" Flandre cut her off with an embarrassed sweep of the hand. "Forget it. I don't need any teaching classes. Lets just get a move on. The wind and foul weather are returning and I want to be clear of this atrocious snowstorm before the whole thing comes crashing in on me again." Not that that would bother you, Flandre thought to herself.

*The nerve of her, suggesting that I need tutoring. Just because she uses a stupid word that I don't know. Its probably made up anyway.* "Yes, yes," griped Cirno as she gazed down the curved corridor that Flandre had carved out of the earth. Patchwork fires still burned in places and the smell of smoking tree bark was beginning to blow strongly back in their direction. Nothing at all like the smoothing pure embrace of the snowstorm, Cirno felt. The icy fairy flinched as a sudden invisible pressure wave gave her a gentle slap across the face as Flandre lifted off the ground, sparkling dazzlingly as icy crystals were caught up among her ascent before the vampire zoomed off with a crack of supersonic sound. "Hey, that's not polite! Don't leave me behind!," Cirno shouted.

It didn't take long for the ferocious storm to start reclaiming the ground and time that Flandre had so costly bought herself. Firstly the vigorous chilling wind had returned to try and batter her out of the sky closely followed by the relentlessly falling snow. Slowly at first but building up in ferocity with each passing second. Already her energy field was stained with multiple impacts of slushy white material that dripped off in droves as she increased her speed in annoyance. All that effort expended on carving this passageway seemed to have been a colossal waste of time. Sure enough, within

ten more minutes the ground beneath her feet was almost completely white again with very little trace left of the destruction that had been wrought upon the land along with her clear path.

Those familiar howling winds began to whisper in Flandre's ears, telling her of her failure. Of her arrogance at attempting to conquer the inhuman forces of nature. That she was but a mere insect in the face of such a vast and great snowstorm. That it would be far easier if she just lay down and let the storm swallow her up. *Shut up! Shut up! Is this all in my head or are they real?* They seemed real. The wailing air-stream seemed to carry hidden words within them that repeated themselves within the vampires mind. *I'm not imagining them, I'm sure of it! My mind isn't like that anymore. Its not! I'm the master of my own thoughts and actions!*

She glanced behind her as she flew through the hectic breeze, searching for Cirno. Her own billowing blonde hair clouding her own vision. No sign of the fairy could be seen through the whirling crisscrossing body of milky snow. It was like the storm was trying to rob her of everything, including her friends. She slowed her pace a little in order to let Cirno catch up and listened intently for any sign or sound of the fairy's passing among the maddening cacophony that the storm presented. And all the while those irritating, mocking words kept filtering into Flandre's mind. "Shut up!" she screamed. "Just shut the hell up!" She pulled one hand away from her warming flame, the fire blinking out of existence instantly and almost angrily blasted into the storm again but the fear of hitting Cirno just barely swayed her hand.

If she had felt alone and oppressed before than that feeling was many times worse now that she truly was alone. Flandre started to passionately shout Cirno's name, sincerely hoping that her words would reach the fairy and that she hadn't made a terrible mistake in taking off without her. That sinking feeling only deepened as the moments passed without a response to Flandre's increasingly desperate calls. At least the voices have stopped. Were they real or only in my head? No, they were real. I'm sure of it. Something else

was stopping as well. The storm seemed to be receding. Losing its raging intensity by the second. Releasing Flandre from its frosty tendrils.

The thudding against her shimmering shield lessened until the snow around her resembled peaceful snow drifting gently down to the ground instead of the hellish rain she had endured up until now. The biting winds died down to a gentle breeze. No less chilly than before but much better than the bone chilling gale. The clouds blanketing out the sky above at least looked a little less threatening. "Hey Flandre!" came an excited voice from her left. The vampire jumped in her skin and tried not to look too relieved when she spotted the ice fairy approaching her rapidly, waving her arms in greeting. She wasn't alone.

Someone holding what looked like a lantern was following closely behind Cirno, hovering just behind her. Flandre didn't recognize the person if indeed it was a person and not something imitating its shape. She narrowed her eyes and called out a warning but Cirno just giggled cheerfully at the gesture and pointed a thumb back at the new visitor. "That's just Letty. She's no one to worry about." Letty? *No one to worry about? Since when did someone appear suddenly, by chance, out of the blue in a blizzard such as this?* The two new arrivals drifted over, icy sparkles marking their passage until both Cirno and Letty were hovering in midair right in front of the suspicious vampire.

"That's a shame," sighed Letty, smiling with good nature. "I worry about you Cirno, always getting caught up in your mischievous capers. I hope you worry about me sometimes as well." She sounded motherly and caring in her speech towards Cirno and Flandre relaxed somewhat. *Maybe its mind control or hypnotism? I can bend less beings to my will after all. Not that I think that way about Cirno of course.*

Letty wore a warm looking white and blue dress which she filled out with a full figure. A trident three pointed golden lapel pin was fastened just above her chest. Her hair was a cherry blossom pink,

atop of which sat a crumpled white hat that resembled a heap of snow. Her eyes were cold lavender and radiated a easy going personality. A smooth silk apron was tied around her waste. *Maybe for extra warmth?* What she had originally mistaken for a lantern was in fact a glowing shard of purple ice that pulsed rhythmically, illuminating the night. It hovered around Letty's waste, shining like a beacon.

Flandre realized Cirno was saying something to her and refocused out of her internal thoughts. "What's wrong Flan? Letty's all right, trust me!" She demonstrated the point by climbing onto Letty's shoulders and waving cheerfully. Letty smiled back up at her and clasped her arms around the fairy's legs so that she wouldn't fall off. "She is the one who stopped the storm after all," added Cirno.

"Stopped the storm?" Flandre asked. Letty nodded, taking a reluctant break from tickling Cirno's legs to answer the vampires query. "Yes, that was me. It was quite simple really considering that it was my storm to begin with." Flandre's mouth quivered slightly and her expression darkened at that little revelation but Letty continued on either oblivious to the fact or consciously choosing to ignore it.

"When I heard that frightening boom I was very concerned so I immediately investigated. As it turns out someone very naughty was trying to ruin my intricately crafted snowstorm." She brought a finger to her lips and looked up. "Shortly after that I sensed another nearby presence and to my utmost surprise in turned out to be my dear child Cirno." The icy fairy rubbed her cold face against Letty's hat affectionately at the mention of her name. "Letty is always very kind to the fairies. She always spares time to play with me. I'm your favorite aren't I?" she asked Letty who responded by reaching up and rubbing her blue hair. "Of course you are Cirno but don't tell anyone else that, alright?"

Cirno suddenly turned her attention to the younger scarlet devil, looking quite serious all of a sudden. "Letty didn't know we were friends Flandre so don't get mad at her. I won't like you if you hurt her." *Hurt her? Well the thought had crossed my mind. She was*

*responsible for this hellish storm and all the hardships I had faced after all. Still, I'd only do something light. I'm not a monster or anything. Setting her dress on fire would be appropriate I think.* She struggled to remain straight faced while imagining the scene but one look at the fairy's determined face was enough to dissuade that particular notion.

Letty continued. "Had I known what I now know I would never had tried to drive you away. I'm very sorry for the mental anguish you must have suffered through. It pains me that I might have harmed one of Cirno's dear friends." '*Mental anguish*' Flandre wondered before the pieces slotted into place. Those wailing voices trying to drive her insane had been her doing! Probably the rising intensity of the storm as well!

Flandre muttered something under her breath and said slowly and with great restraint, "Am I supposed to suddenly forgive you or something? You have no idea how miserable this experience has made me!" Her voice trailed off, becoming low. "But if Cirno says you're fine than I might be willing to..." Letty hovered forwards towards her, arms outstretched. Flandre flinched defensively but before she could do anything Letty wrapped her arms around her and said soothingly in her ear, "I truly am sorry Flandre. Allow me to make it up for you. I can guide you through this storm and help you find the one you seek. Cirno told me about your predicament. Let me help you."

Letty's hands felt faintly cold in the same way that Cirno's pale skin did but her thick padded dress and her soft caring voice made Flandre feel warm and relaxed. A hand started to stroke her blonde hair gently which made her feel butterflies in her stomach. No one had ever treated her like this before. Not that she could remember anyway. The memories of her parents were hazy at best and what she did remember wasn't all that pleasant. Her cheeks flushed a rosy red colour and she pushed Letty lightly away, conscious that Cirno must be watching her. *Geez, I'm supposed to be angry at her.*

"Don't treat me like a kid," said Flandre. "I'm probably older than you are. Still, if you help me I'll somehow find it in my heart to forgive you." Letty clasped her hands together and smiled graciously. "I'm so glad. And as a start I've given the maid Yumeko and her party some particularly unpleasant winter weather to enjoy and a little of the same treatment I mistakenly gave you. Cirno suggested that might cheer you up."

It certainly did. Flandre enjoyed the image that flashed through her mind of Yumeko staggering around, slowly freezing to death while aimlessly trying to navigate the endless snowstorm. Still, something had been bothering her. "Letty," she said hesitantly, testing out the name for the first time. "Is Cirno your daughter or something? Earlier you called her your child."

Letty giggled and cheerfully replied while shaking her head "No, no. I just like calling her that and she likes being called that. I like to think of myself as her mother anyway as I'm a Youkai of winter and she is a child of winter. An icy fairy." Cirno nodded approvingly, grinning at the loving words.

"Anyway," Letty continued. "I'm told that this person, Claudette, is traveling alone. I can feel someone alone not too far from here. Would you like me to guide you?"

It was Flandre's turn to grin this time. She was looking forward to the upcoming reunion. "Sure, lead the way Letty," said Flandre before turning her gaze towards Cirno. "By the way, what happened to your tiara?" Cirno's jaw dropped as her hands frantically searched across the top of her blue head of hair.

## Strange Tidings

Flandre was crawling down in the snow on all fours, edging herself stealthily forwards one careful step at a time. Chilly breath escaped out of her devilish grin as she contemplated watching Claudette's face contort in pain and anguish. She had to mentally wrestle with the overwhelming urge to simply fly up over the crest and devastate anyone unfortunate enough to stand in her path but that would be too easy. Almost there now. Patience Flandre. Patience.

Flandre didn't want to mess up this grand opportunity by unwittingly giving herself away and letting the bitch thief slip out of her talons as she had done so on multiple occasions in the past so the vampire had decided to confirmed her target by sight before taking any further action. This time will be different. To that end she had insisted that Cirno wait closely behind with Letty so that the at times troublesome fairy wouldn't mess things up.

The blonde scarlet could hear footsteps now plodding in the snow and her heart skipped a beat. She froze among the frozen ground, listening to the steady thud of boots and slowly crawled upwards until her head was poking above the peak of the small ridge. A vast huddle of white clad trees greeted her below, densely packed enough to obscure her probing vision. Flandre frowned, cursed her luck and waited as patiently as she could manage while fighting the growing agitation building in the pit of her stomach.

"See anything?" asked Cirno in a hushed voice from inside her hiding place. Her cold blue eyes staring at the vampire through the folding leaves of a bushy hedge. Flandre flinched as her careful silence was shattered. Her expression turned sour as she turned back to glare viciously at Cirno while holding a tense finger up to her quivering mouth. Thankfully Letty, who was crouching closely behind Cirno, had the good sense to hold a hand over the fairy's blabbermouth before she could say anything else. Letty winked at



Flandre while whispering soothing words in the little icy spirits ear as she stroked her other hand lovingly through her blue hair.

Flandre snorted and turned her attention back to the unknown figure while trying not to let her aggravation levels reach boiling point. *Sometimes I wonder who's side that fairy is really on.* The footsteps sounding off into the night still trudged rhythmically and without haste so at least the unidentified being hadn't been alerted. She sighed in relief at that and silently floated over the snow, so as not to make any sound, and made her way carefully towards the nearest tree.

The blizzard strengthened its cold grasp on the land the further Flandre advanced away from Letty's calming influence. The winds began to howl fiercely, returning to the cruel biting coldness that gleefully stripped any trace of warmth from the body before carrying it off into the night. Flandre ignored the chilly pickling sensation that crawled over her skin and quickly darted from tree to snow covered tree, edging closer like the expert stalker she was. A ghostly pale light could be seen now which was partially distorted by the falling currents of snow.

A few stealthy dashes later and she caught the first glimpse of her target. Her heart sank at the sight, like someone had broken a sworn promise to her. This wasn't Claudette at all, unless of course she had radically changed her appearance since their last meeting. The energizing excitement she had felt at the prospect of finally coming to grips with her elusive tormentor ebbed out of her mind, making her feel strangely forlorn. She could only see the back of this new entity through the falling snow but what she did see reignited some of her earlier interest.

A pair of feathery angel wings protruded from the figures back, between which sat a swaying ponytail of thick blonde hair. The figure was armoured in bright blue plate and wore loose fitting robes which covered half of her body. Flandre silently sank back into the blizzards embrace and carefully maneuvered herself to the front for a better look. Holding her breath so as not to let out any chilled air which

might give herself away she darted from the trees, making use of the snowstorm to shield her from view wherever possible.

Within scant moments she was crouching under a collapsed tree, overlooking the figures approach. From the front this newcomer appeared female judging from the shape of her armour and looked very much like a Valkyrie out of one of Flandre's books through without the iconic shield and spear. This one appeared unarmed though appearances were often deceiving. Also Flandre doubted that a legendary warrior woman who served the gods would be shivering and clutching her arms tightly around her chest like a mere mortal. An orb of glowing light hovered around her head, guiding the way and keeping the darkness at bay. The Valkyrie was quite beautiful looking and radiated an angelic aura about her until she sneezed that is, dispelling the illusion of grandeur.

"Bloody cold," she heard the Valkyrie moan while snorting in an attempt to clear her nose. Flandre lay soundlessly under the tree, wondering what to do next. This wasn't Claudette so why waste any time with her? Normally she might have taken the opportunity to chat with someone new outside the mansion but she simply didn't have the time. "How can the empress expect me to find a vampire in this wasteland?" grumbled the armoured woman and Flandre's heart froze. Was she looking for me or another vampire? There were certainly other vampires in the land but the young scarlet was positive that she was the subject being carelessly mumbled about.

The Valkyrie was trudging through the snow very close to Flandre's hiding place now and would pass her very shortly. Flandre's frowned, thinking as the steady sound of boots squelching through the snow filled her alert ears. She nodded to herself and waited until the stranger had passed her position before springing out from between the cold blackened branches like a disturbed wild animal and launching herself at the unsuspecting Valkyrie.

Flandre landed between those two large angelic wings, clasped both hands tightly under the blue armour's leather straps and used the force of her momentum and a well placed pair of knees to topple her

startled prey to the ground. They both collapsed into the snow but the Valkyrie was the one who got a face full of white slush. She coughed and spluttered and struggled to rise with a strength that belied the size of her muscles but Flandre slid a taloned hand swiftly under her throat. She stopped moving suddenly as if Flandre had somehow channeled Sakuya's power to stop the passage of time.

The floating orb had become embedded nearby in the snow and bathed Flandre in a ethereal looking blue light. The light glinted off her eyes, creating the sensation of something menacing watching from the shadows.

"That's better," said Flandre, trying her best to sound as threatening and in control as possible. She had played this particular game with the fairy maids many times before and had become somewhat of an expert in the intimidation game over the years, much to the displeasure of Sakuya. "You were looking for a vampire but it appears that I found you instead. Why are you looking for me?"

"You're making a mistake." replied the Valkyrie, a testy edge to her voice that suggested that she wasn't as scared as Flandre would have liked. "What makes you think that I'm looking for a vampire at all? I'm just heading out for a friendly drink with an acquaintance, that's all." *Going to test my patience are we? Fine. I hope that I get to use some of my more fun techniques out on you but I'll be a nice little girl and give her a chance first.*

Flandre leaned her wings over so that they dangled in front of her helpless captive while increasing their multicolored luminescent to almost blinding levels. "Beautiful aren't they?" Flandre boasted with undisclosed pride. "You couldn't name another vampire blessed with wings like these. Do you recognize me yet? I already overheard you earlier, liar. Tell the truth!" Flandre could feel the woman beneath her squirming in discomfort as the bewildering kaleidoscopic light shone directly into her face. Flandre herself remained unaffected by her own dazzling light show.

Next, one set of her wings slashed downwards in a sudden chopping motion, the multiple diamond hard crystals that dangled across her wingspan cutting deeply into a nearby fallen tree branch that had become lodged nearby in the snow. Having been almost surgically pieced along its length, Flandre's wing lifted it neatly off the white covered earth and dangled it teasingly in front of her captive. "That could be you next if you don't start answering me," the vampire warned before flexing her wingtips in such a way that the branch was violently shredded from the inside out as her sharp wingtips pulled in opposite directions.

Woodchip flakes peppered the area as Flandre lowered her other free wing towards the Valkyrie's unprotected face, enjoying the look of unrestrained panic etched there which was reflected back to her on the shining surface of one of her orange wing crystals. *Ha, you don't think that I can see your face from atop your back but I can!* Flandre could also feel the subtle change in heartbeat and noted the smell of beads of sweat forming and slowly running down skin.

"F-fine!" stammered the Valkyrie, her angelic wings flapping restlessly as the colourful pointed tips edged downwards like a guillotine. "I'm not looking for you. I'm after the sunstone and it just so happens that you're the one who has it in their possession. Give it to me and we will stop seeking you out, vampire." So that's the reason. Flandre was almost disappointed at this answer. She hadn't given the stupid piece of bronze much thought after placing it inside her bag but she wasn't about to let this angel know that it had been embarrassingly stolen from her.

"Maybe I'll give it back, maybe not. Its up to me isn't it? Now what's your name Valkyrie, and who is this empress you speak of?"

Hesitantly she answered. "My name is Alyssia and I'm not a Valkyrie, whatever that is. As to the empress. The empress is my empress. The eminent Isabelle Paleflower and not one to be disobeyed. She has decreed that the arcane stones that were recently liberated fall into her possession, the sunstone being one of them. Belmorn was

tasked with recovering the sunstone piece. You killed him didn't you?"

"Yes I did. He made the mistake to pick a fight and mock someone much stronger than him and paid the price. You and that empress person better learn that lesson Alyssia. Stop trying to ruin my fun because I get in a really bad mood when people make light of me. That sunstone piece is mine or until I grow tired of it. Maybe I'll hand it over but not for free. It depends on my mood."

"My empress was not pleased when Belmorn failed to return. She won't be happy if you kill me either so please, let me go. Just give the stone to me and we can go our separate ways. Nobody else has to be harmed." Silence lingered for a moment, stretching for a uncomfortably long time. Alyssia then became aware that a weight had been lifted from her shoulders and cautiously pushed herself to her feet. She frowned as she realized she was utterly alone once again, surrounded only by the nameless trees and falling snow.

Having learned all that she wanted to know and mindful not to waste any more time, Flandre sped off back to Cirno and Letty's hiding place, following small landmarks she had memorized before departing to avoid becoming swept up in the formless snowstorm. The closer she got to Letty's position, the weaker and less intense the storm became.

The winter Youkai's calming influence acted as a guiding beacon by the way the landscape gradually lost its harsh inhospitable weather conditions. The cold biting winds and pallid snowballs grudgingly gave way until the surrounding area resembled the kind of winter wonderland that Flandre had always dreamed of playing in as she watched from behind one of the confining glass barriers that were her mansion's windows.

"Hey, Flandre!" Cirno called as Flandre neared her location. The little ice fairy burst from between Letty's arms and thundered into the open while waving her arms in the air like she was guiding in the

vampire for landing. "What took you so long Flan? It must have been the thief, right? That's why you took so long to return."

Flandre landed softly, her shoes digging midway into the snow. Cirno's tone of voice turned into one of resentment while her blue eyebrows turned into a frown. "You gave Claudette a lesson without me, didn't you! I wanted to help out! I'm strong too you know!"

Flandre walked past her, smiled and tapped her lightly on the head as she passed. "It wasn't her. Just some random stupid stranger wasting my time. Don't worry Cirno, I'm sure you could handle her," she said mockingly.

Cirno pouted, her lips pressing together like a squeezed tomato waiting to burst. A low mumbling reverberated inside her mouth. When the pressure was too much to contain she started jumping on the spot chanting "I can beat her, I can. I the strongest fairy! I can!" The fairy's glowing blue wings fluttered, intensifying their glow.

Letty tutted and shook her head gently, holding out her hand to catch a falling snowflake drifting down from the cloudy sky. "You shouldn't tease Cirno like that Flandre. You'll set her off for a while now. You probably know how excitable she is." Despite this light scolding, Letty's face was still smiling with no hint of malice. Flandre felt herself growing quite fond of this Youkai's mannerisms. "So," Letty asked as she released the snowflake to the winds. "This mysterious traveler wasn't the person you were looking for?" Flandre shook her head, her blonde side tail bobbing side to side.

"Well then," Letty began, rubbing her chin in thought. "There was someone else that I didn't mention before." Flandre's ears perked up at that little revelation but she made no move to interrupt for now. *There better be a good reason for withholding this.*

"Before I met up with you and dear little Cirno, I sensed the vaguest shadow of a presence passing through my magnificent snowstorm. Not a Youkai but the merest suggestion of one that misplaced the snow around it, that being the only clue as to its existence. From

what I gathered from Cirno, this Claudette character might have been masking her presence. I dismissed it at the time as an apparition as there are so many strange occurrences in this land that you learn to keep a cool head around them and not jump at every shadow."

Letty noticed the way Flandre was glaring at her with uncaring eyes and folded her arms in bewilderment. "What's wrong Flandre? Don't lose heart, I'm very sure that I still remember the path so don't fret. You must be cold. Here, let me warm you up." She walked closer, moving her arms to wrap around Flandre but the vampire edged backwards out of reach. *Stop trying to embarrass me!* Part of her wanted to be hugged, to let Letty make a fuss over her but her pride wouldn't allow it. At least not in front of Cirno.

So with Letty guiding them out in front, Flandre and Cirno flew closely behind lest they become engulfed in the raging blizzard that encapsulated them on all sides. Only Letty's will kept the immense white walls of snow from coming crashing down on them. The night was still in full bloom with the moon barely visible through the swirling grey storm clouds, looking down on them from its high orbit.

Flandre wondered what sister was doing right at this moment. Remilia would probably be reclining in her armchair while Sakuya informed her of the latest news and gossip circulating Gensokyo at the moment. Flandre always listened in when she could, letting the stories paint a picture and imagining herself as the main character.

Flandre lost track of time as she entertained all the strange antics that the scarlet devil mansion was getting up to in her absence so that when Letty spoke up it took the vampire a second to remember what she was doing and where she was. "Huh?" was all Flandre could manage. Thankfully Cirno was all too happy to chime in, seizing the chance to appear insightful. "She said that we're rapidly approaching the oni bar Flan. Gheez, are you spacing out again? You had that glazed look over your eyes."

"I am not imaging things!" Flandre snapped. "And my name is Flandre, got it?" Cirno mumbled to herself, scrunching her mouth up like she had just tasted the worlds sourest lemon. "Flan is a cool nickname. Don't you like Flan or something, Flan?" she replied with one blue eyebrow arched, barely suppressing a snigger. Flandre narrowed her eyes at the fairy but instead turned her head towards Letty and asked, "So what's this oni bar? A bar for oni's?"

The purple crystal that served to illuminated the night for Letty gave the winter youkai's smile an almost eerie quality as she answered under the ghostly lavender energies. "Yes, that's right Flan, err, Flandre," she rapidly corrected. "You might be wondering why they chose such an nondescript name. Well, the answer is that the bar has been destroyed multiple times now by the overenthusiastic of its customers. As such, its a dangerous and violent place and best avoided. The thief's course lines up nicely with this place. Maybe she'll get her comeuppance. No need to put yourself in harms way."

Flandre looked down at the rapidly changing landscape below them as she pondered this information. *Claudette moved in this direction and was most likely was aiming for this bar. What else is in this region?* She looked around her. The worst ravages of the snowstorm were finally behind them and this area was only marred by the merest suggestion of snow. Nothing much else could be seen though. Just endless forest broken up by the occasional small mountain. *The bar had to be the answer! Maybe she was looking for a buyer for her stolen loot? That seemed likely. Or maybe she was just after a stiff drink? Well, whatever. I'll find out soon enough.*

The party of three drifted down to near ground level, all the while Letty was trying her utmost to convince Flandre that the oni bar was bad news. *Well, I don't mind a little danger but letting that backstabbing bitch off unscathed would ruin my entire night.* Still, Flandre was very interested in this bar and its questionable reputation. Exploring curious new areas like this was exactly the reason she had escaped the confines of the mansion. It was like



killing two birds with one stone. *And one of those would die for real if she could help it.*

Flandre noticed an old wooden building looming up high on the horizon. The closer they got, the more details Flandre could make out. It was a few times bigger than a standard barn but was strangely misshapen, like it had been crudely repaired many times with new sections added on or torn down as needed.

Phantasmal neon light shone out of the cloth covered windows. Many of the trees next to it had been chopped down. Green moss covered the structure from top to bottom and some of the wooden planks were rotten to the core. Flandre landed and started to walk towards the entrance, the only way flanked by dirty metal posts from which hung tattered banners of screaming demons, roaring dragons and the like.

Bizarre music filled Flandre's ears, a wired mixture of drums, trumpets and piano. She wrinkled her nose at the strong scent of alcohol. Not wine nor beer but many intoxicating substances mixed together in a lethal cocktail that made Flandre feel lightheaded just taking the smell in. Letty and Cirno followed closely behind, the winter youkai placing her hands protectively on the smaller fairy's shoulders.

The entrance was simply a large jagged hole cut into one side of the haphazard structure. A dirty looking sheet blocked the view inside but rapturous laughter and loud voices could be heard inside. Vaporous mist was emanating from the opening which stank of unfamiliar chemicals. A doorman stood outside, blocking the entryway. He was a leathery skinned oni with two horns, one of which had been broken off. His large muscular arms bore many scars from a no doubt very lengthy doorman career and were folded across his chest as he stared at the three newcomers with mild amusement.

Flandre was feeling slightly nervous now as she approached. Her rapid footsteps slowed slightly as she imagined the many countless

beings inside all crammed together tightly like sardines. She, who had lived such a sheltered and pampered life up until now was only used to the small handful of people living at the scarlet devil mansion but she hadn't come all this way for nothing and quickly regained her footing. The doorman stepped up, blocking Flandre's path. "No fairies," he stated flatly in a gruff tone.

"What?" Flandre asked, confused as to way he wasn't letting her past. "No fairies," he repeated, stabbing an accusing finger at Flandre and then Cirno. "What?" repeated Flandre, staring incredulously at the oni. "Did you just call me a fairy? Do I look like a fairy to you? Well, do I?" Cirno in her sudden bad temper tried to shake herself free from Letty's firm grip but couldn't escape her clutches. Inside she settled for shouting "What's wrong with fairies? Huh?"

The doorman shook his head, scratching at his ear and letting out a frustrated breath. "Look, we get's a lot of people or beings coming here, throwing their weight around and getting themselves beaten to a bloody pulp. This ain't the place for no fairies and their like round here, kay? You's is going to get hurt and we don't need no more deaths round here."

"I'm not a fairy!" Flandre yelled, thrusting her arms down in disgust. "You's look like a fairy to me. You ain't much taller than yer icy pal back there," he answered, nodding at Cirno. "Though yer purple haired snow woman can come in. She looks tasty." He smiled and licked his fat lips, glaring at Letty with a lecherous shine. Letty shuddered and shook her head, pulling the squirming icy fairy away with her. "We'll wait outside Flandre. I'll not let little Cirno take one step inside this house of sin."

"Harsh words," chuckled the amused Oni, watching Letty struggling to wrestle the hyperactive fairy away who was a whirling of bad tempered arms and legs. Flandre walked right up to this walking obstruction and stared at him right into his eyes. "I'm a vampire and a dangerous one at that. Now let me in before I let myself in."

The Oni held his fleshly hands up in mocking gesture of fear but his wild crooked smile remained. "Whoa hold on there little lady, nobody has to get hurt here." Flandre frowned darkly. *This guy is really pushing me.* But before she took any further action he spoke up again. "Fine. I'll let you's in," he said, grinning, "if ya can move my arm back. Show me ya not a fairy, little girl." He stuck his right arm out, his well toned hand flexing before leaving it invitingly open. "Humph," Flandre grunted scornfully before grabbing his massive hand with one of her own pale slender ones. His fingers closed around it, totally eclipsing it from view. *Heh, stupid creature doesn't know what he's in for.*

"Ready?" asked the doorman, deliberately slurring his speech in the way an adult panders to a baby. "I'll try not to hurt you too much," answered Flandre who was smiling with the cruel certainty of someone about to murder someone brutally. "GO!" he shouted, immediately summoning his inhuman strength and throwing it against Flandre's much more delicate looking form in the hopes of ending this farce quickly. The vampire's arm didn't budge an inch. It was like the doorman was pushing against an implacable meters thick stone wall.

Flandre grinned and calmly pushed back, exerting a small portion of her potential force. The Oni's bulging muscles shook with the effort of holding her back, clearly not expecting any form of resistance at all from this fragile looking girl. "Not bad," he grunted but Flandre noted that he was still smiling, like he was pleasantly surprised at this unexpected challenge. She steeled herself and her intuition proved correct as her opponent had clearly been underestimating her and redoubled his assault. Her muscles burned with the strain of holding him back.

She snarled in annoyance. Nobody at the mansion usually gave her this much trouble. She hadn't had to try this hard in forever. She beat Meiling every time they had a contest of strength but Flandre always suspected that the kindhearted gatekeeper let her win. When

Flandre asked Meiling this she would simply smile and say that the young mistress was far too strong for her.

"What's the matter?" asked the Oni, sweat dripping down his face as he exported even more force against Flandre's trembling arm. "Is I too much for yer?" Flandre bared her fangs, summoning up everything she had to hold back his relentless onslaught but every time she increased her pressure he redoubled his, pushing her back even further. Flandre was moaning with effort, wincing at the pain running down her arm. Her poor abused bones were screaming at her to just give up but that was something that she just wasn't prepared to do. *Is his strength limitless? I'm I going to lose? No, I won't lose. If this guy is psychically stronger than me then I'll just have to win another way. As Meiling always reminded me, if you can't win with power, win with thought.*

Her shoulder was burning now and she knew that time was running out for her. The Oni was straining as well she could see as the veins in his meaty neck bulged outwards, feeding lifeblood to his hungry muscles. Flandre briefly wondered what he tasted like, she hadn't had a drink in a little while but shook her head. The pain helped her to push aside the usual overwhelming obsession with blood and focus on the current matter at hand. "I can feel yer weakening girl," the Oni said under stained breath as Flandre's entire posture was titled towards the ground to avoid her aching arm from snapping off at the shoulder. Her sharp wings dug into the ground, propping her up like tent posts. "Your breath really stinks," Flandre forced out through gritted teeth.

Her talons poked out just a little, just enough to poke painfully into the Oni's skin without breaking it. "Ouch," snarled the doorman, flinching at the stabbing flash of torment. Flandre seized this chance and yelled like a girl possessed as she threw everything she had left inside her into a grand sweeping lunge that pushed back the Oni with such force that he was flung back into the wooden wall, smashing into it like a cannonball and disappearing from sight into

the bar beyond to a chorus to surprised gasps and drunken laughing from within.

Flandre's face beamed with triumph. "I won, ha ha ha!" she said, then winced painfully as she mistakenly threw her arms up in a sign of victory. "Awwwww," she moaned, rubbing her strained arm tenderly. *That will be sore for a little while but my vampire body should take care of me as it always does.* Flandre looked up, alert like a scared cat as the doorman pushed the cloth away from the door and walked with a visible limp back out into the night.

"You's cheated," he growled, looking a bit scatterbrained as he rubbed his thick black hair. "No I didn't," remarked Flandre innocently, "I beat you, now let me inside. Or do you want another round?" That was a bluff of course. *I hope I don't have to ruin my other arm on this stupid oaf. This is getting ridiculous. Maybe I'll just blast him or something if his brain doesn't get the message.*

"You's stabbed me with suming," he accused, pointing angrily at her. Once again, Flandre looked perplexed at this baseless accusation, turning her hands up and over slowly for the Oni to examine. "See, nothing. Don't be such a sore loser."

The doorman snorted in disgust. "Fine. You's is brave, I give yer that much." He pointed behind him with a sore thumb. "Goes inside then. There be many Oni an others stronger than I inside. Watch yerself. We have only two rules inside. No weapons and no powers nor danmaku. You's got a problem, you's use yer fists or yer better watch out. Wells, ave fun little lady." He chuckled to himself as Flandre entered, like he was the only one who got the joke. The vampire ignored him and looked over her shoulder to catch one last long distance look at Letty and Cirno waiting patiently for her safe return before she entered the oni bar and disappeared from sight, a cloud of noxious smoke drifting upwards before the cloth fell down once more.

*Wait for me.*

## Barroom Brawl

Inside the bar the first thing to strike Flandre was the sheer number of people of all types and colours. They were all around her, smoking, swearing and most of all, drinking. You'd be hard pressed to even spot the briefest glimpse of flooring such was the press of life surrounding her. Glowflies were trapped in multi-coloured glass containers that were suspended from the patchwork ceiling. The resulting reflections bathed the bar below in a psychedelic lightshow of blues, yellows, reds and mixtures depending on how agitated the bugs became at their forced imprisonment.

The majority were Oni of course but there were also maybe types that the vampire hadn't seen before. A group of hulking looking lizard type things dressed in plain looking robes were merrily singing together while bashing their tankards together in celebration. Purple glowing liquid sloshed everywhere but they seemed not to mind. Some Oni seated on a nearby table did mind when the drink splashed all over them and wasted no time in smashing a chair over the back of the nearest scaly creature which rapidly escalated into curses and a full-blown brawl.

Jubilant cheers erupted from the crowd as they urged them on, taking great delight when one of the Oni was thrown into a collection of barrels which promptly collapsed under his weight. Black looking tar spread out over the floor, causing several punters to fall over in stumbling sticky heaps.

Something entirely encased in bulky wooden armour was trying unsuccessfully to pour booze into his mouth. Moss and small leafy branches sprouted from places across his suit. Flandre suspected that it wasn't possible to remove it. His friend or maybe just some random stranger was laughing at his clumsy attempts so the tree knight instead flung the contents across his face. "You drink," he rasped. That strange music that had been heard from outside was

now twice as loud and hammered in Flandre's eardrums like someone was beating inside her head directly.

A large group was dancing madly around the stage upon which sat a ramshackle piano which was hammering notes totally out of tune. Those too far gone to control their bodies in any meaningful way nevertheless drunkenly flailed themselves about in a series of motions that looked more dangerous to be around than graceful.

Flandre didn't know where to start and was feeling a tad overwhelmed. The noxious scent of booze that she smelt was penetrating every pore of her body and polluting her clothing. The constant background noise, talking, shouting and droning music all combined to blind Flandre's prized senses, reducing her to a mere pinprick in a sea of shuffling and pushing bodies. Something tall pushed past her from behind, muttering in an inhuman voice "Watch it girl." He or it was wrapped in a heavy leather greatcoat complete with a baggy hood that served to fully cover his form from sight. The stench radiating off him was almost overpowering and Flandre gagged, fighting the urge to throw up in disgust.

Flandre winced as he passed by, the pungent smell seeping off him on invisible lines. She spotted the bar serving area and rapidly moved towards it, figuring that anywhere would be better than standing here any longer. She hesitantly edged her way between the many tables filled with youkai, people and everything in-between while trying to calm down her growing anxiety. The intoxicating atmosphere and claustrophobic spacing were all new experiences to the pampered vampire.

*I've faced more vicious hardships than this in my time.* She shook her head. *Flandre, snap out of it! What would sister think if she knew you were afraid?*

"Hey, why don't you sit down over here?" asked a remarkably human looking being as Flandre attempted to pass his table. Only a overabundance of muscles marked him as anything but. "Come on and join us," remarked a spiritual being who was seated next to the

man. Its voice was distorted like static and it had clear transparent skin which exposed the inter workings of its body. Flandre stared at wonder at the intricate veins pulsing lifeblood throughout his body and licked her lower lip, feeling suddenly parched.

The clear being pulled free an unoccupied chair and twisted its flowing face in to what Flandre assumed was a smile or something approaching it. Flandre masked her initial surprise well and thought for a moment, thinking this might be a good opportunity. "Here, have a drink," the man asked, lifting up an unopened bottle full of swirling brown booze that sparkled in the strobing lights.

"Have you seen a woman wearing black clothing with brown hair wrapped with a ribbon?" asked Flandre. The man frowned and shook his head. "No, I don't believe I've seen anyone like that. I was too bedazzled by your beautiful face to notice anyone else." Flandre couldn't hide the faint smile that appeared on her lips. "Thanks but I'm looking for someone. Maybe another time." She started to walk away but the man pushed his chair away to bar her path, stubbornly refusing to let her pass. He moved to place a hand on her shoulder. "I asked you to-"

Flandre flinched back as if his touch contained all the possible germs in Gensokyo and snarled "I didn't give you permission to touch me!" She aimed a nasty punch squarely at his jaw but he caught her fist in his palm. "Who said I needed permission?" he said jokingly. His friends at the table cheered in delight, fist pumping the air and spilling drink in the process. Rather than pull her fist back for another try Flandre bent her legs, tensed her muscles and flung him hurtling backwards simply by punching his grasping hand. Her great strength more than enough without the need for any forward momentum whatsoever.

He crashed into another occupied table. The occupants didn't take kindly to having their table smashed and drinks spilled everywhere so they proceeded to beat the living hell out of him. His friends gasped and rushed past Flandre to aid him before there was nothing left but a bloody pulp. The vampire looked around with a scathing



look, daring anyone else to mess with her but nobody seemed to care much. With that over with Flandre now noticed at least two other separate brawls in progress off in the smoke filled distance. She shrugged and moved on. At least with that shock to the system her earlier anxiety had been completely forgotten. *Thanks for that at least, morons.*

Flandre carefully navigated her way past the hazardous maze of tables full of drunk, dangerous punters, titling her wings up as she did so to avoid them becoming snagged in the tight confines. The rainbow light filtered through her wings, turning her into a mobile kaleidoscope of colour. Several loud voices complained but Flandre ignored them and no one else challenged her. She sat atop one of the dirty looking wooden stalls that had been covered with torn red fabric and looked around from her vantage point at the serving area. No sign of Claudette. No sign at all. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Flandre sighed and leaned her elbows on the stained surface of the bar. Rows and rows of gleaming bottles stood next to each other in disorganized chaos in front of her, no thought given to their random placement at all. The alcohol laden shelves looked more like a mad scientists playground with the way some of the bright liquid bubbled like it was alive.

To her left sat a shifting form of neon green goo in the vague shape of a goat or at least something with horns. It indicated something on the self and produced three silver coins out of its slimy appendage which it promptly deposited on the counter. The barman winced as he grudgingly collected the coins and wiped his hands on his already torn and dirty apron. Flandre's red vampire eyes could see the vague outline of half eaten shapes floating around the creatures 'stomach' and shuddered when she saw the silhouette of a decaying hand.

"Over here barkeep! I need another!" came a slurred voice from Flandre's right. Flandre narrowed her eyes. She was sure she recognized this person. The figure wore a black suit top with a pink short skirt but her most striking feature was a pair of fluffy looking

bunny ears poking through her pink hair. Her pale skinned face was bruised in many places. *Ah, I remember now. She's the medicine seller from the market. I wonder what the bunny is doing here?*

The seller banged her hand on the counter which caused the empty glass she was nursing to shake precariously near the edge. "Come on, hurry up already! I've had a bad day today." The bunny rubbed her bloodshot eyes and cradled her head in her arms. Flandre noticed nasty looking rope burns on her wrists. What's going on with her? "Why me?" she mumbled under her arms before looking up and noticing that Flandre was staring at her.

"What's wrong? Something on my face?" Flandre shook her head, searching for something to say. "I-I was just wondering if... you had seen a friend of mine. She looks-" but before Flandre could finish her sentence the barkeep came over and refilled the empty glass with clear mouthwatering liquor. "There you go Reisen. You got enough money for this. Its your fourteenth dark margos tonight and they ain't cheap. And don't try that hypnotism mumbo jumbo again or your be thrown out on yer ass! I've got oni watching me this time."

Reisen's eyes teared up like a little lost puppy and her mouth quivered with forlorn emotion. "Why is everyone so mean to me? First master and now you? Why does everyone pick on me? Its not fair." The barkeep turned his eyes up towards the air and rubbed his forehead in annoyance before some rather loud fellow swore at him to get a move on and serve the rest of them. The barkeep cursed back with some colourful phrases of his own and stomped over in a huff. Some of the curses were new to Flandre as were some of the unfamiliar body parts being referenced.

Flandre cleared her throat, slightly annoyed that she had been ignored as the bunny took one long hard swig of cool liquor, draining half the glass in a series of loud gulps. "So," Flandre began again. "About my friend?" Reisen had drained the glass completely by this point and was pathetically trying to lick up any possible trace of booze left from the clear surface before she looked up at the vampires words. "You want to be my friend?" she said, tears falling

down her bruised cheeks. "Ah, thank you little girl!" she yelled, swaying unsteadily as she wrapped her arms tightly around Flandre like they were long lost sisters.

"Thank you so much. Thank you. I need a shoulder to cry on." Flandre looked totally bewildered as this complete stranger snuggled against her while sobbing softly at some great unknown tragedy. The bunny's ears tickled against her face and her breath stank of alcohol. "No, you've got the wrong," Flandre began as she gently tried to pry this unwanted attachment loose.

"Master Eirin punished me again," Reisen moaned between sobs. "She said I didn't sell enough medicine even though I tried my hardest! Why does she pick on me when I try my best?" Flandre gasped as her waste was crushed under the tightening pressure of Reisen's drunken embrace. *Urgh, am I going to die being hugged to death by a sad drunk? That would be a pretty pathetic way to go out.*

Flandre managed to summon enough breath into her constricted lungs to say "L-Let go of m-me! You're hurting me!" Reisen blinked once like someone had thrown cold water all over her face and looked up from the vampire's breast to her now beet-red face. "Oh, I'm sorry. I can't do anything right today it seems." The bunny's hands rubbed Flandre's cheeks with apparent concern. "Are you alright? Here, have some of my drink." Reisen pushed her glass against Flandre's face, thrusting it clumsily at her with wobbly hands. Flandre snarled and maneuvered her head out of the way. "I'll pass and the drinks empty anyway." Reisen unhappily looked down at the empty glass, totally crestfallen. Her tall bunny ears drooped downwards in sadness. "I don't even have any more money," Reisen almost whispered.

"Anyway." Changing the subject. Lets hope this wasn't a colossal waste of time. "I'm looking for someone. Black clothes. Bag of loot. Dark brown hair with ribbons. Shady looking. Ring a bell?" Reisen shook her head silently, rubbing the side of her glass like it could magically conjure up some more alcohol. *Great. Just great. Well, maybe I can make use of her.* "Will you help me find her? I'll get you

another drink if you do." Reisen's eyes glimmered with purple magic at that proposal. She jumped up off her stall with a renewed sense of purpose. "I'll find her. You can count on me! I'll show you that I'm useful! Master doesn't know how lucky she is!" And with that she pushed herself into the tight press of punters and vanished from sight.

Flandre let out a tired breath and pushed herself away from the barside. *Where to go now? Back through the tables?* Flandre waved a disgusting cloud of tobacco smoke away from her face and progressed towards the nearest and loudest crowd of spectators watching a brawl. She nimbly picked her way past a patch of broken glass and stepped over a knocked out Oni and started to press herself into the crowd, trying to get a good vantage point. She heard punching and kicking noises as flesh connected again flesh and chants of the fighters names. "Yuugi!" they called or "little demon!"

"Get her Suika!" "Oh blood, blood!" "They're really giving us a good show tonight." "Hey, watch out!"

Flandre shoved a few youkai aside, earning her ill tempered curses to which she replied in kind until she managed to elbow her way into the front row. The sight that greeted her was of two Oni savagely fighting with hands and feet and whatever else happened to be within arms reach. They were almost comically matched. Both female in appearance with one being a greatly tall well built blonde haired Oni with well defined muscles and a single red horn sticking out her forehead. The other, shorter one was only half her stature but was fighting no less fiercely than her larger opponent. This one wore a more feminine dress adorned strangely with heavy looking chains, had long flowing orange hair and twin twisted horns that resembled the branches of a tree.

Flandre didn't know which name belonged to which fighter as the crowd chanted but that didn't stop her from enjoying the spectacle. Their clothing was torn and bruises decorated their bodies but they smiled as they fought as if they were having the time of their lives. The younger vampire sister wondered if that was because they were

drunk or generally enjoyed fighting or perhaps a combination of the two. Sweat glistened off the larger ones biceps as she landed a punch that was narrowly blocked by the orange haired Oni bracing her arms together in a double block.

Still, the force of the impact drove her back into the crowd, knocking about ten youkai of various shapes on their collective asses. "Get up Suika!" "Don't lose little demon!" Went the chants nearest to Flandre who suddenly wanted to join in on the fun. "Keep fighting Suika!" she shouting, fighting to be heard over the clamor. The press of bodies behind her was constantly shifting and Flandre brandished her fangs and snarled in annoyance as she fought her own personal battle to avoid being rudely shoved into the fray.

A short creature in a blue leather jacket was not so fortunate and was unceremoniously pushed into the fray. The larger one, Yuugi, Flandre thought by process of elimination had already began to charge down Suika as she pulled herself out of the bloody remains of a table and its former occupants. The berserk bull rush slammed into the unfortunate Youkai, driving it under heavy pounding footsteps which crushed its body like a waterballon, such was the volume of gory entrails and red blood that bathed the flooring.

Several baying voices laughed at the unknown being's tragic demise. The scent of blood heightened Flandre's excitement and she shouted out encouragement again. *This is great! I wonder how Meiling would fare? That would be a wonderful show to watch!*

"Come on! Don't think that little love tap slowed me down!" called Suika who waved a finger tauntingly at her charging opponent. Yuugi grinned in return and yelled back, "I wouldn't have it any other way!" Suika fainted to the left but because she was so spectacularly drunk she tipped up under one of her own chains. Yuugi seized the chance and lunged forwards, laughing all the way. "Don't make things too easy for me!" she called, smashing her fist downwards in a murderous strike. Suika rubbed her head, opening her tired eyes which rapidly widened as her brain remembered what she was doing a few seconds ago.

She wrapped a chain tightly around her arm and lashed out with the remainder, catching the running Yuugi in the kneecap. Yuugi grunted in pain and toppled over like a tall oak wood, falling face first onto the wooden floor which cracked into woodchips at the weighty impact. Suika clumsily regained her footing and, picking up a nearby metal dinner plate she jumped on top of the much larger Oni, straddling her. During these few moments Yuggi groaned groggily and reached over to pluck up a beer bottle that had rolled near her head.

She burped loudly, expelling enough yellow gas to create a small toxic cloud that choked Suika who had been brandishing the dinner plate two handed and been preparing to slam it down into her face. "Damn, empty," said Yuugi wistfully who then shattered the beer bottle over Suika's head. A shower of brown glass glinted off the ceiling lights as Suika slumped off to the side, clutching her forehead. "Ou-ou-ouch!" she moaned. Flandre waited with baited breath, waiting to see what would happen next when an especially large Oni attempted to barge into the front of the cheering crowd behind her, propelling her and two others out into the open.

"Stupid Oni," spat one of the dispossessed patrons. Flandre grunted as she flailed her arms like a windmill to avoid falling over. She spun on her heels, searching for the idiot who pushed her with fire burning in her gaze. "Stupid am I?" spat Yuugi from behind her. Flandre turned just as she heard the panicked words "No, I didn't mean-" before Yuugi savagely backhanded the person who had used the unfortunate choice of words right in the side of the skull with a sickening crunch of bone.

Flandre and the other remaining Youkai, a tall looking purple skinned humanoid dressed in a crisscross patterned bodysuit looked nervously at each other, realizing that they were standing right in the middle of the warzone. "Huh?" asked Suika, rubbing her shoulders. "Am I too drunk that I'm imagining things or are you standing in my way?"

"Maybe they want to join the party?" mused Yuugi who had somehow found or been handed a slightly chipped glass full of extra

strength booze. She took a long swig as the crowd agreed and roared their approval at the prospect of fresh victims for the slaughter. Flandre shook her head and backed away a few steps, unwilling to be a part of the spectacle instead of watching it from afar. Having hundreds of eyes watching her every move was very unnerving. Bodysuit was even less happy about it and made a break for the mass of bellowing onlookers but they simply shoved him back into the danger zone.

"Urgh," groaned Suika, rubbing her belly. "Where are you hiding Yuugi?" Her tummy rumbled, a tremor that Flandre actually felt pass gently under her feet via the damaged floorboards. Looking down Suika gasped in shock at the state of her outfit. "Who did this? Look at it! My chains are missing and its torn to tatters!"

The surrounding crowd were all too happy to provide answers to this profound question. "It was those two!" "Yuugi did it! You're too drunk to realize!" "It was the crystal winged creature!" "They's been mocking ya Suika!" "Tear those ugly wings off!" Flandre's cheeks flushed and she felt like unleashing a hellstorm of burning flames in the vague direction that spiteful wing comment had come from but the onrushing Suika trampling towards her made her reevaluate her priorities.

The knowledge that she wasn't allowed to use weapons and spiritual attacks was still firmly in her mind (apparently bottles and table parts didn't count as weapons here) so she summoned up the playful training that Meiling often taught her when the gatekeeper had one of her rare breaks from monotonous guard duty. Remilia insisted on the training, thinking that it would teach her younger sister a sense of discipline and self control. Even so, Flandre looked forward to the training as Meiling always found ways to make it fun instead of a boring chore to appease sister. That, and fighting couldn't possibly not be fun.

With that in mind she insulated herself away from the baying crowd who were all calling for her bloody demise and focused on the few seconds she had before Suika reached her. Normally her insecurity

at being stared at by countless strangers would have sapped her willpower but this time her brain didn't have enough room for anything else but survival. It may only be a bar room brawl but she had already seen what happens to those that were unlucky enough to lose.

*Should I block or dodge? Will it be a kick or a punch? Will the attack come from the left or right? Or maybe from below?* These are the thoughts that passed through the vampire's mind as she tried to read her opponent's erratic body language. *I'll do Meiling proud!*

Flandre's eyes flashed with recognition and she ducked low to avoid the wide sweeping swing aimed squarely at her head while simultaneously kicking out at her opponents kneecap. "Whoa!" Suika exclaimed as she lost her balance and fell forwards, holding her hands out shakily as she narrowly avoided smacking her face through the flooring. Flandre rushed forwards and turned, hearing a horrified yelp from behind her and feared that Yuugi had decided to attack her while her gaze had been elsewhere.

"Gee. That guy didn't last long," slurred Yuggi who seemed even more drunk than before. In her outstretched hand, suspended in midair with apparent little effort hung the bodysuit Youkai from earlier. He or it was hanging limply like a broken puppet. The Oni held him in front of her face, inches away from the sharp red horn that protruded from her forehead like some kind of medieval decoration. Then she looked at Flandre and the recovering form of Suika with some amusement. "This one wasn't any fun. Hey girl, why don't you play with it?"

The next thing Flandre saw was a twisting form of limbs as Yuugi arched her arm back and hurtled it towards her with the speed and strength of a demon. Flandre danced backwards but she worked out pretty quickly that it was traveling far too fast for her to avoid it completely so she folded her wings protectively around her body and braced herself as best as she could. The rainbow lights above were blotted out and Flandre's world was reduced to shadow as the looming Youkai projectile slammed into her. She grunted, her



wingtips and battered arm sending intense signals of pain throughout her body.

Flandre collapsed under the weight, coughing at the strange stench that emanated from this purple skinned form. The crowd grew excited and loud and Flandre heard the tortured shriek of wood being torn asunder and the groaning of something large and heavy being hefted into the air. She pushed her head upwards to see that Suika had torn the piano from its fixings. Broken musical notes played out like a prelude to murder. She held it aloft, looking around uncertainly for a moment before the crowd reminded her that there was still a certain vampire that needed a good crushing.

Suika smiled. "Ah that's right. Here, catch!" she yelled and flung the piano with all her might. *Gosh I hate pianos.* White and black keys rattled loose as the annoying instrument sung its last performance midair. Time seemed to slow as it often does when life or death was on the line. Flandre angrily kicked the dead-weight off of her and rolled to the side just as the heavy piano smashed into the already ruined floor, plunging into the depths of the buildings foundations.

"Ah, I missed," sobbed Suika who seemed genuinely upset at the fact. "Sorry to disappoint you," spat Flandre, rising defiantly to her feet. "Now you've gone and made her upset," said Yuugi who finished another drink in a single long swig before setting it down with a little too much force, causing the glass to shatter all over the place. She picked a fragment of glass out of her skin and flexed her mighty shoulders. "Ah, watching you two really got my blood up!" she said playfully, holding up her cut thumb to unnecessarily illustrate the point.

Flandre wiped her mouth as Yuugi's imposing form took a step towards her. "Lets go! Lets go!" Suika happily chanted behind Flandre but she was too smart to take her eyes off the Oni in front of her for even a fleeting second. *Damn it all. How am I going to deal with these two at the same time without my destructive powers? Anyway to escape into the crowd? No. Damn those scumbag spectators! I should collapse the whole building on top of them for*

*this! Well, I'm not going to get sandwiched between these two buffoons! Better to take the initiative!*

She ran at Yuugi, pumping her legs for more speed to close the distance. Yuugi grinned and assumed a clumsy looking drunk fighting stance. "Looks like we got some action here," she called. Flandre ducked her legs low and sprung up, propelling her outstretched fist at the Oni's face. Yuugi snorted and slapped Flandre across the face, swatting her out of the sky like a fly. Flandre skidded across the floor before angrily pushing herself to her feet. One hand held her beet red cheek which stung like a fresh bee sting. Her hand twitched with barely suppressed rage but she managed to remind herself not to blast this Oni to pieces.

"Mad are we?" asked Yuugi. "Come. Pay me back!" She waved her fingers invitingly. Flandre snarled and launched herself at Yuugi, the anger she was feeling lending her muscles strength. The vampire threw a punch which was effortlessly slapped away so on the next try she extended her talons and slashed instead, producing a pained yelp from Yuugi as claws brushed against bare skin when she tried the same slapping trick. Flandre knew that her claws hadn't broken the blonde Oni's tough skin but she seized her chance anyway and leapt up, delivering a powerful flying punch to the side of her opponents face.

Yuugi's head jerked to the side and she stumbled awkwardly, blinking rapidly. Her fists swung out automatically but without guidance they had no chance to hit the nimble vampire who darted between the clumsy strikes to land a vicious haymaker right into the ribs. Flandre drove her fist into Yuugi's tight muscles and winced as pain flared up along her knuckles as her supple flesh hit into a brick wall but she made herself not care. She knew that had to have hurt, and not only herself.

Yuugi grunted but laughed as she unexpectedly drove her forehead down in a deadly headbutt. "Nice punch!" she shouted, clearly excited as her red horn bared down on Flandre like a pointed lance bathed in blood. Flandre's heart skipped a beat as she twisted her

form stiffly to the side. It was just enough to avoid becoming skewered. The horn cut across her shoulder thinly, carving cleanly through the red fabric of her dress. Flandre's blood stained the dress an even deeper shade of crimson as it dribbled down her back.

"You wretched monkey!" Flandre screamed with raw emotion as her eyes blazed with a fiery brilliance. Her unhurt hand started to glow faintly with the beginnings of something destructive but before Flandre could lose herself to bottomless rage Yuugi lunged forwards and pressed her face inches from Flandre's. She fixed the vampire with a menacing glare and shouted "I hope you're not about to make a fatal mistake girl!" Flandre flinched uncertainly as the drunken breath billowed her golden side ponytail and hair. She wasn't used to someone standing up to her like this so fearlessly and with such conviction besides her older sister.

She tightened her fist into a trembling ball and growled threateningly but her subconscious mind hesitated to act when faced with someone right up in her face like this. "Well, aren't you going to hit me or are you content just trying to stare me to death?" Yuugi asked, daring Flandre to make a move. "Go and get me a drink and I might forgive you."

*Forgive you? Forgive you? You should be the one begging for forgiveness!*

Cheers and shouts rang around manically as Flandre heard the words "You're wide open Yuugi!" before Suika barreled into the larger Oni from behind, gleefully shoulder barging her off her feet. Yuugi just had just enough time register a look of complete bewilderment at to why she was suddenly in motion before she was flung forwards. "Wait!" Flandre breathed before Yuugi's looming form collided into her, stanching up the vampire like a net and carrying the screaming bloodsucker with her on her spiraling journey into freeflight.

Onlookers panicked as they tried to shove past each other to avoid the Youkai cannonball but most didn't make it as both Yuugi and

Flandre slammed into the crowd, throwing Youkai around like a chaotic destructive tidal wave.

"Don't forget about me," chided Suika, tutting to herself. "I'm not drunk enough to miss out on the fun!"

# Battle Royal

There was a strange haze clouding Flandre Scarlet's mind. Her world had been plunged into darkness. Her mouth was aflame with burning liquid that bubbled and fizzed around her tongue. She tried to lick away the clammy substance but winced as her sensitive tongue brushed against the corners of her mouth. The vague trace of voices could be heard just outside her muffled hearing like phantoms boarding near the plane of the living. Flandre attempted to push her eyelids open but they felt heavy. It was like trying to pry apart curtains that had been sewn together and after a while she gave up.

After some indeterminate amount of time had passed she was finally able to piece together fragments of memory that drifted in and out of focus. Her temple throbbed as she struggled to remember and a tortured groan escaped her lips. "Hey, you waking up?" she heard someone ask but making out the words was proving far too tough for her so instead she focused on piecing together what had happened to her. It felt like grasping at elusive objects in the dark but the night was a vampire's friend so she persisted.

She had been fighting those two drunken Oni's, that much came quickly to her. Flashes of punches and kicks and flying tables and chairs played out in her mind's eye. A stab of pain as the littler Oni, Suika was the name the crowd had been chanting, charged into her from behind and pinned her to the ground. Flandre had kicked up, attempting to knock her off before she could deliver a vicious hammerblow that would have surely shattered her skull but instead she desperately reached up and grabbed the demon's arms, snarling as her hurt shoulder screamed at her in protest. Her drunk fueled strength had been extreme but she was no normal run off the mill Youkai herself. Flandre's arms shook with the strain but she held fast.

Suika was laughing gleefully in her face like this was some kind of game. "How long can ya hold on?" she slurred, her words sounding

like she was sucking a lemon. Flandre growled back defiantly in response, mostly to stop herself from crying out as her shoulder bones twisted painfully inside their socket. The vampire was scared that Suika would bring her horns into play while her arms were occupied and gore her like a mad bull but either she was too drunk to think of it or she didn't want to kill her opponent after all. She certainly seemed to be having fun as she smiled down at Flandre. That irritated the vampire. It was like she was being made light of.

This contest of strength stopped abruptly when Yuugi twirled in a circle, moving faster than her muscular body had any right to in order to bring down a devastating clenched fist with all the momentum behind it she could muster. Suika wasn't blindly drunk enough to miss the imminent danger however and sucked in air as if her lungs had turned to lead. "Wah! Let go off me!" she pleaded with Flandre, suddenly showing signs of real panic on her features. "What are you-" Flandre began before her ears alerted her to something moving fast enough to create ripples in the fabric of space around her. A fearful sense of apprehension caused the hairs on the back of her neck to stand up at attention. She released the manic Oni who immediately leapt away. Flandre followed suit and rolled to her left moments before Yuugi slammed her fist through the floor.

Several onlookers were knocked off their feet. "Oh nice dodge!" said Yuugi approvingly as her gleaming red eyes follow her two adversaries as they righted themselves. Flandre rubbed her chin, letting out a breath that had caught in her throat. Suika clumsily climbed to her feet, scratching her head. "Butt out Yuugi. That winged thingy is mine!" She prodded her chest repeatedly. "I always fight you and the novelty has worn thin you stupid flailing monkey!" Which she punctuated by sticking her tongue out and making a hand gesture that Flandre didn't know the meaning of.

"You little twerp!" Spat Yuugi, her expression turning sour. "You still owe me for the last round of drinks and I'll make you pay up one way or the other!" She cracked her knuckles threateningly. Several onlookers shouted out their roaring approval. Someone smashed a

glass of wine on the floor, shattering into a thousand separate pieces. A purple puddle formed, bubbling fumes of flowery scents into the air. The chant of "Fight, fight, fight!" rang out around the room, the multiple voices combining into a mind numbing assault on the senses. Flandre held up her hands against her ears, trying to block out the pounding chorus. She was tired of being used for others entertainment. Some of them even had the nerve to taunt her, calling her a little lost girl and that she hadn't a chance.

Flandre snatched up a few pieces of broken glass and threw them indiscriminately into the crowd. "Shut up with your mindless droning maggots! I am not your plaything!" Then she turned towards Yuugi and Suika who were busy glaring and bickering with each other, the way they carried themselves suggesting that they were mere moments from lunging violently at each other. "Hey you two!" shouted Flandre, "I'm still standing here. If you're so strong then why can't you knock me down? Is that the best an Oni has to offer? Ha, pathetic!"

*Better to make them both angry. It will make things easier.*

Suika rounded on Flandre, smirking. "That sounds like a challenge to me!" Yuugi spat on the floor, her face twitching in mild irritation. "Now you've done it," she said, cracking her knuckles in an effort to intimidate. "Now I have to smack you down. My pride won't allow you to utter anymore foolish words!" And with that the hulking Oni stretched her body briefly before charging at Flandre, her every footstep causing the bear glasses nearby to shake uncontrollably. Suika was right behind her taller companion, trying to jostle for position. Eager to be the first one to reach Flandre.

The scarlet vampire readied herself, watching as Suika ducked below a speedy backhanded swing from Yuugi in the sprinting race to reach the blonde haired girl that had defiantly challenged them. "Buzz off," spat Yuugi over her shoulder at the twin horned Oni but there was no chance of that happening as Suika cheerfully shook her head and kicked Yuugi in the back of the thigh, causing her to stumble into a table head first. Her horn became impaled into the

wood so Yuugi snarled and ripped the table to pieces with her bare hands. Someone in the crowd sniggered at her but shut up quickly when Yuugi growled and stared daggers at the assembled onlookers, daring the perpetrator to try it again.

Meanwhile Flandre was standing ready, smirking at Oni's misfortune and happy that they had gotten in each others way just as she had intended. Fighting one drunk raging demon was a lot better than fighting both at once and having to watch your blind spot. "I'll wipe that smile off your face!" yelled Suika as she pulled back her arm to strike, the chains tied to her dress clattering behind in her wake. Flandre however had other ideas and slammed her foot down hard on the weakened wooden floor plank that she had identified earlier and placed herself so that anyone attacking her would have to pass over it.

The wooden plank creaked loudly as it was ripped from its fellow floorboards. Rusty nails were flung into the air. All this happened while Suika was still in the process of running on top of it. The Oni just had enough time to utter a bewildered gasp before the ground disappeared from under her. She was thrown completely off her feet as the planks bounced upwards at her, acting like wooden guided projectiles. The Oni hit the floor squarely on her back as one of the flying planks smacked into the underside of her chin, knocking her down like a sack of potatoes. Suika began rubbing around the base of one of her treelike twin horns while cursing under her breath at the red bruises that had blossomed across her skin.

Flandre didn't wait around aimlessly for her to recover as Yuugi was already almost upon her and the charging demon's expression was fuming, most likely fueled by those that had the nerve to laugh at her. The vampire jumped up onto a table, knocking the various glasses and bottles to the floor as the crowd cheered her on, eating up the spectacle of a good fight for once. She landed with a thump near Suika's squirming form and without hesitation grabbed both of her legs as tightly as she could manage and began to swing the Oni in a circle just as Yuugi stormed into striking distance. A mighty fist



already hurtling down towards Flandre, promising a great deal of pain and harm if it were to land.

Twin red eyes glared at Yuugi as Flandre swung Suika directly into the larger demon's path, yelling with adrenaline as her muscles burned with the effort of propelling the surprising heavy Oni. "No, no, no!" Suika repeated endlessly as she tried desperately to twist her body loose from its inevitable high speed collision. Flandre yelled as she hurtled the living cannonball right at Yuugi. The vampire had the immense satisfaction of catching a brief glimpse of fear flash on her opponents face as Suika's wailing form slammed into her midriff, knocking the wind out of her sails with a punishing gut buster right into the ribs.

"Urghhh!," Yuugi grunted as she was flung backwards, her impossibly strong feet the only thing keeping her upright. She coughed up something she must have had for lunch as her insides were pushed and compacted painfully against each other. Her toes gripped the floorboards with inhuman strength and with a beastly roar Yuugi grabbed Suika's arms and began an attempt to forcibly wrench her from Flandre's grip. Flandre faltered for a moment as she struggled to hold on but she retained her grip on the Oni's legs with sheer stubborn determination.

"Let me down!" Suika pleaded as she was stretched and pulled in a titanic game of tug of war. "Don't pull me apart!" Flandre bared her teeth as her hands began to shake with the monumental effort it took to simply keep her hands plastered to Suika's legs. Yuugi pulled and shook and yanked and did everything she could to try to pry Suika away from her but Flandre doggedly held on. The vampire's hands were becoming slick with sweat. Urgh, I'm losing my grip. *At this rate...*

She had to do something and fast. "Let go off me!" Suika yelled like a spoiled brat in the midst of a temper tantrum. "Let me go! Get off'a me!" She reached around with her neck and tried to snap at Yuugi's grasping hands while at the same time trying to kick off Flandre's grip. "Oi!" snapped Yuugi. "Keep that rabid maw away from me!"

"Just let go then," said Flandre, smirking. She had to concentrate hard in order to keep her voice level and not betray any trace of the discomfit she was feeling but somehow she managed it. She wouldn't give these two the satisfaction and getting her opponent angrier would help for what she was about to do next. "Despite your big muscles you can't even rescue your friend."

"Hmph," mumbled Yuugi. Any trace of drunkenness was suddenly absent from her expression for the first time that Flandre had seen. "You don't have anything on me little girl, allow me to demonstrate!" With that said the Oni's arms tensed, power coursing throughout her large frame. Suika shook her head frantically, recognizing the signs. "Hey, stop that Yuugi! Don't tear off my arms!" she whined, redoubling her efforts to shake off her captors iron strong grip.

"Ahhhhhh," Yuugi roared, pulling like her very soul depended on it. Suika screamed, expecting to be forcefully parted from her beloved arms but Flandre simply let go. For a split second Yuugi blinked with surprise at the lack of resistance she was both expecting and looking forward to before stumbling backwards uncontrollably, flattening everything in her chaotic path like an out of control locomotive. Flandre's grinning face only lasted for a second however. She grunted as she was pulled along for the ride despite letting go. One of the chains that adorned Suika's dress had somehow managed to snare itself around Flandre's right leg.

Flandre gasped as she was caught on the tail end of her very own trap. *It wasn't supposed to end this way!* She dug her claws into the wooden flooring but her only reward was a shower of toothpick sized fragments that pinged off her face. The crowd howled with feared and multiple voices of terror cried out at once in their attempts to avoid the stumbling trio. Yuugi grabbed at a solid looking supporting beam that stretched up to the ceiling but only managed to crush it beneath her grip. "Damn it!" she spat before doubling over a table and colliding into a large collection of barrels lined up against the far wall, dragging the screaming Flandre and Suika with her. The barrels

which had had several cautionary large X's stamped across their flank burst open like ruptured fruit.

A cascade of strong smelling bitter alcohol washed all over Flandre, pouring into her mouth and bathing her entire body in an intoxicating cocktail. Flandre coughed up some of the pungent liquid and groggily tried to rub her burning eyelids but her arms were pinned under the combined weight of Yuugi and Suika. They had all become entwined in a tangle of limbs with Flandre sitting uncomfortably at the bottom. The gods must have been smiling on her because no pesky horns had ended up piecing her supple body. She tried to move but the bitter alcohol was swimming around in her head, robbing her of her strength and focus. Even the Oni's were moaning happily which showed just how strong the substance had been. She felt sick and almost retched up.

Flandre found herself blacking out and fought the haze that was rapidly forming over her slipping consciousness but found herself slipping into darkness all the same.

And that was all Flandre remembered as someone nudged her again. Her forehead was throbbing. Her stomach felt like a storm had been raging inside it. It reminded her of the time she had eaten some bright coloured flowers from the garden because they resembled a species pictured in a herbal remedy book. "Hey, wake up. Are you going to lie there all night?" someone familiar asked. Flandre moaned and squinted her ears open. For a moment Flandre thought she was at home and a fairy maid was trying to coax her out of bed but a pair of horns put an end to that thought.

"Suika!" Flandre mouthed as she suddenly experienced a deep sinking feeling like someone was holding a very sharp knife over her sleeping neck. "Oh, awake now are we?" Suika said. "No. You still seem a little spaced out. Lets help you out a bit." The next thing Flandre felt was a glass full of ice being emptied over her forehead. The yelp Flandre emitted could have shattered an iceberg. She shot up lighting fast like a springboard, her eyes stretched completely open as she took in deep breaths.

She had been lying on a wooden bench next to a table and had narrowly avoided smashing her head against the edge. Suika had been leaning over her, glass in hand and had recoiled at the vampire's sudden awakening. "Ah, you took me by surprise there, girl. Do ya want some more ice?" Suika had a very high pitched childish accent now that Flandre wasn't fighting for her life and had the time to recognize such things. *Why is this demon acting all friendly all of a sudden? I'd better move before...*

Flandre slapped Suika's hand away a little harder than she had intended and stood up off the bench before anymore freezing cold ice could be poured over her. "W-what do you think you're doing?" Flandre accused, pointing a finger at the Oni's puzzled face. "Are you trying to freeze me to death? What's your game? You tried your best to beat me up earlier and now you're acting all friendly with me?" *She's probably after something. Sister always warned me that beings on the outside are always after something. Well, besides simple fairies like Cirno of course.*

Suika waved a hand dismissively. "Ah, that," she said while turning her gaze to one side to mask a smirk. "That was just a fun fight. Fun! If it was a real fight you wouldn't be standing there now would ya? If ya didn't want a fight than why did ya come in here?"

Flandre bristled at the suggestion. "Humph! If I didn't have to hold myself back with those stupid rules you wouldn't be standing there right now." She fought down the sickening feeling and forced herself to continue. "Besides, it didn't seem very friendly when one of you tried to stab me with your horns. Are you trying to trick me?"

"No, no, no," replied the Oni, shaking her hands. "I'm pretty sure that was Yuugi. You know, the musclebound drunk. That one, ya. Anyway, you fought well. A good fight and a good drink. Haven't been pushed that hard in a while little girl. What's ya name?"

"Flandre," she replied hesitantly. "And I'm not a little girl." *Why does everyone call me little? This demon isn't any taller than me. It's so annoying! ho*

"Hey, nice fight crystal girl!" came a deep growl from one of the neighboring tables. "Yeah," added someone else. "Great way to kick off the night!" *Crystal girl? My wings?*

"Most entertaining indeed. Most don't last seconds. Yes, indeed," came another. Flandre allowed herself a flush of pride and a smile almost creep across her mouth. Sadly people praising her wasn't a regular occurrence back at the mansion or anywhere else she had been for that matter. Suika nodded. "Seems like you picked up some admirers little... err Flandre." One voice helpfully chimed in that it had indeed been Suika who had tried to horn her. Suika laughed nervously before turning around and telling the patron to shut the hell up before she stuck her horns somewhere uncomfortable.

Flandre smiled a little at that. Suika noticed that and slapped her on the back hard enough to make the vampire wince with pain.

"Hey, knock it off," Flandre complained sharply, shoving the grouping Oni back to her bench. "I'm looking for someone and-" she let out a loud unflattering burp. "I... I feel sick. I don't have time for this." Flandre sighed and began to get up to leave but Suika unceremoniously yanked her back down. "What is the meaning of-" Flandre snapped before Suika reached behind her and shoved another glass in her face. Flandre almost slapped the glass right out of her hand, fearing another bathing of ice was on the cards but this glass was filled with liquid.

"Ah, that's right. Ya drank some pretty strong stuff back there. Strong enough to knock even me out. Drink this. I use it when I need to get something important done while I'm drunk out'a my mind!" Flandre eyed the drink suspiciously. It was an orange and yellow mixture. The colours swirled around like they didn't belong together. It gave off a tangy if not totally unpleasant scent. Suika held it aloft, watching Flandre eagerly. "Go on, take it! I bet yer friend will be more happy if ya aren't keeling over from alcohol poisoning."

"Poisoning?" Flandre mused allowed, wiping the sweat from her rosy red cheeks. "I'm already sick. Why would I want to drink more

poison?" *Still, that icky alcohol stuff is still flowing through my veins. I feel it sapping away at my spirit. Having to find and fight that bitch Claudette while in this state would be more hassle than its worth. What would sister do I wonder?*

As Flandre pondered that question, Suika withdrew the mixture and shrugged to herself. "Fine then. No skin off my back. I was just being all nice like because us Oni's enjoy a good fight and you gave us a good one tonight. Oni's don't poison by the way, just so you know. If someone makes a fool out of me I use these!" she said, holding up a clenched fist. "Well anyway, see ya around Flandre. Lets do this again sometime. Maybe some danmaku next time?" And with that Suika got up and walked back into the crowd but not before setting the glass on the table and winking at Flandre over her shoulder.

*Damn it, and I was about to suggest that she try the 'drink' first herself to prove it. I'm sure that's what sister would have done. She blinked her eyes which had been starting to water. Well, anyway... argh, my forehead is throbbing. Why is it throbbing so much?"*

She glanced at the mixture again, feeling conflicted. *Well, I can always just find some lucky somebody to gift me their blood if this turns out to do me harm. That should flush it right out of my system and provide me with a healthy treat and boost to my energy. In fact, why didn't I do that earlier? Surely it would help purge this toxic substance from my bloodstream.*

She hesitantly grasped the mixture and rose it to her lips. *Maybe I'll just try a little sip. I'm tough enough to survive that much at least. I'm Remilia Scarlet's younger sister after all.* She ignored the strong scent as best as she could manage. The glass was a second from making contact with her lips when out from the crowd came "Hey, there you are!" So concentrated on the glass in front of her, Flandre jumped and almost dropped the glass from her hand.

Glancing to her side, she spied Reisen, the unfortunate medicine seller. The bunny Youkai pushed herself past several beings to reach the table that Flandre sat at, earning her a few choice insults along

the way. Flandre felt an excited tightness in her chest. *Could she have found Claudette? Truly?*

"Ah, I'm glad I found you. I'm sure I found that person you're looking for." Reisen bobbed up and down with a hopeful look on her face.

"So, how about that drink you promised? Oh, but before that. Since I did you a favor could you perhaps buy some medicine. I have a wide range on selection. I really need to sell something tonight, so please."

Flandre considered for a moment then handed Reisen the orange and yellow mixture. "Here take this. Now show me where she is."

Reisen frowned at what was presented to her but took it all the same. "W-well... follow me then. Oh, she's not along by the way. Two others were seated with her. One of them is a witch named Marisa but you probably don't know the name. She-"

"Oh I know her alright," Flandre replied.

## Reunion

"Urgh, what is this stuff?" asked Reisen who was standing beside an increasingly annoyed Flandre who's patience was rapidly wearing thin. Her pray was causally sitting right in front of her, laughing and chatting. Completely unaware that her luck had just run out and here was Reisen threatening to expose her with a stream of endless questions and opinions. If it wasn't for the bar's very loud and somewhat bizarre music and the shuffling crowd swarming around them both then she had no doubt that her presence would have already have been revealed. "It's a special energy drink, now be quite or you'll alert them," she hissed, keeping her voice low. Flandre supposed she should be more forgiving of her unwanted company due to the fact that it had been Reisen that had lead Flandre to her prize but now she wanted nothing more than for Reisen to disappear down a rabbit hole and never return.

"But if they're your true friends then you should make a grand appearance! They'll like that! Stand on the table and tell them about your heroic exploits against the Onis! I saw it myself. I'll back you up if you promise to buy some medicine later." Flandre's jaw tighten as several prods to the back threatened to drive her over the edge. "Quit jabbing me already. I want to keep it as a surprise ok?" she lied. Reisen mumbled something to herself that was lost in the general hubbub of the crowd but Flandre didn't notice. She was concentrating on trying to hear whatever Claudette was saying. Picking apart specific voices from those countless accents around her wasn't easy but with her practiced vampire senses made it made it just about possible to covertly eavesdrop on the conversation talking place. She felt like a human spy from one of her old trashy mystery books.

For all the fun she was having Flandre would have enjoyed nothing better than bursting out from the burly demons she was hiding behind before savagely bashing the thief's face against the table until her skull cracked open but the presence of Marisa threw a



major spanner in the works. The human witch was certainly no pushover and not one to be trifled with lightly. Flandre was certain however that if push came to shove she could take on the human witch alone without little miss shrine maiden Reimu's interference. The way events had transpired at the scarlet devil mansion. Not to suggest that Flandre hadn't enjoyed the double duel immensely and taken a liking to them both. *Still, Marisa and Claudette together? I guess thieves really do stick together.*

"I found some interesting things tonight," said Claudette, leaning across the table slightly and smiling to punctuate the point. "Quite the profitable night of work so far. I even found a couple of gullible helpers who kindly assist me. Little girls can be so silly and impressionable sometimes." She chuckled in a way that made Flandre want to march over there and wipe that stupid smug grin off her face. *She even has childish ribbons in her hair and she's acting all high and mighty. Gosh I hate her so much!*

"Anyway," Claudette continued. "How have you fared Marisa? Any big scores I should know about? Maybe you saved the fate of Gensokyo again in my absence?" Marisa took a long swig of bubbling ale and straightened her black witch's hat which had been leaning clumsily to one side. Her wide blinking eyes and bobbing head suggested she had had quite a lot to drink already. She slammed the glass down hard, spilling some of the contents over the table and whooped at the bitter tasting ale. "Ah, that's some good stuff. Really hits the spot. Won't you have some Claudette?" Marisa waved a hand mockingly. "Enough of that weak 'sophisticated' wine you always drink."

Claudette held the purple liquid up to her face and swirled it around thoughtfully. "Tell you what. When I find a buyer for my spoils I'll treat us all to a fine vintage human wine from Rinnosuke's shop. Only the rarest most expensive variety. That'll change your attitude towards wine Marisa, I'm sure. You don't have to be a snob to enjoy the finer things in life." Marisa shook her head dismissively, slurring the occasional word. "Maybe. Maybe. Anyway, I haven't been out

adventuring. No way am I adventuring while Reimu rampages all over Gensokyo. Finding good items is always so much harder when she is off enforcing the law."

"You mean stealing things," chuckled the third figure, the only person that Flandre didn't know. She was a thin but well defined girl with shoulder length blonde hair that had been combed extremely straightly. She was dressed in a blue cotton bodysuit with faintly shimmering black armour plates woven into the fabric. She wore a purple headband around her forehead and her skin was a pale white colour, almost like a living china doll. There was an easy air around the table, suggesting that the three figures knew each other quite well. Flandre forgot the urge to lash out at Claudette and listened intently now that Reimu had been mentioned. Reimu? Just what was going on around here? *Dueling with Reimu and Marisa would be a great way to end her adventure and make it a night worth remembering.*

"Hey, I don't steal things. I BORROW things and always return them whenever I have the time. Well eventually," Marisa replied, those last two words uttered with a little hesitation. "Anyway, don't act like you're any better than me Paddy. We all know what kind of business you get up to. Besides, it's your turn to buy the drinks and I'm almost running empty." She held up the glass which distorted her face under the orange flowing ale. Paddy held her hands up in mock embarrassment. "Guilty as charged I'm afraid but hey, treasure hunters like us are often misunderstood. It's not my fault that stuffy old Youaki decided to horde all sorts of mystical items to themselves, never letting them see the light of day. I'm providing a valuable service to all of Gensokyo."

Flandre walked a little closer, trying to mingle in with the large clusters of the shuffling bar crowd while shooting a harsh look back at Reisen just to be sure that the bunny didn't start talking again. She wanted to be sure not to miss anything interesting.

Claudette chuckled lightly. "Certainly. Liberating valuable artwork is such selfless work so nobody should object if we try to cover our

expenses a little along the way. Being such a paragon of virtue isn't always its own reward." Paddy and Marisa both nodded their agreement, grinning profusely at each other. Claudette continued on. "Anyway, I'd like both your options on the items I have 'liberated' tonight. I could use a practiced appraisal."

"Oh sure, I'd have no problem helping you out," said Marisa, her face full of mischief. "So what kind of cut can I expect?" They talked and bickered like that for a little while longer before they eventually returned to the subject of Reimu. All the while Flandre had stood listening, very patiently for her standards. Even now her hands were clenching and unclenching in anticipation. When they mentioned Reimu again the vampire felt like bursting out of the crowd and demanding that Marisa guide her to the shrine maiden right away but that little nagging feeling nestled away at the back of her head that was probably her mind's common sense just about persuaded her not to.

"Yeah, somethings going on. Something about stones," said Marisa when the subject of what exactly is going on came up again. "That or cherry blossoms or some ancient all powerful being awakening. I forget exactly which it was this time but I'm pretty sure Reimu hammered the word 'stones' into my head over and over again. Anyway I didn't want to play second fiddle to Reimu tonight. She has Yukari to watch out for her this time. Plus I had a drinking session lined up!" She rose the glass to her lips and poured a healthy amount of light brown liquid right down her throat, downing all the remaining booze in spectacular fashion. Marisa hissed happily as the malty flavoring tingled her insides all the way down to her stomach.

"Stones?" said Claudette, more to herself than anyone else. "What kind of stones? Are they valuable per chance?" Marisa looked up at the battered ceiling thoughtfully, not looking at nothing in particular. "Maybe to someone. Who knows. I guess if everyone's out looking for em' then they must have some value to somebody." She turned her black witch's hat towards Paddy and smiled. "It's your round Paddy. I'll have the usual. And Claudette will be having?" She turned

towards the shadowy thief but Claudette was stroking her dark brown hair with one well manicured hand, deep in thought. "Hey, Clau?" asked Marisa a little impatiently. "Paddy's getting the round in. What are you having? Let me guess. Wine right?"

Flandre was immensely disappointed that Marisa didn't know Reimu's location or didn't seem to care but the part about the stones was certainly interesting. Could it have something to do with that mysterious sun stone that Flandre had recovered? Somehow she just knew that it did and if she got it back from Claudette then Reimu would eventually have to cross paths with her to take it back and that would be an entertaining prospect indeed. *I could have my long awaited rematch with the miko at last!*

Flandre blinked suddenly, knocked out of her pleasant little fantasy by Reisen tugging at her arm. "Hey, I f-feel really sick. What is t-this stuff you gave... me? It's not.." she babbled incoherently, her grip intensifying along with her quivering voice. "Hey, be quite," Flandre hissed as several people and non-people turned around to stare at the suffering bunny. Flandre would have said more but her tongue caught in her throat. Reisen was clutching one hand tightly around her stomach and her face had turned deathly pale. Her skin was slick with sweat and she was unsteady on her feet. Flandre recoiled in horror. Just what had been in that devilish concoction that Suika had given her?

Reisen grasped at Flandre pleadingly but the vampire was powerless to aid her. Flandre had always been more gifted at destroying things rather than healing. Not that Flandre had any intention of venturing closer to the ticking time bomb. "Urgh," Reisen groaned as she clung to the loin cloth of a rather muscular looking lizard like creature with shimmering green scales. The lizard stopped in mid conversation and peered around curiously, perhaps wondering who would be stupid enough to interrupt him. By this point Flandre had already relocated herself and watched on with morbid curiosity, wondering how long the bunny's bubbling stomach would hold out. She wasn't concerned about being discovered by the

occupants of Marisa's table at all as they had all turned their undivided attention upon the escalating scene unfolding before them and besides the vampire had hidden herself quite well in among a group of chattering adventurers.

Marisa gazed up at Reisen as she used her crossed arms as a pillow. Her side ponytail had somehow come to rest awkwardly between her eyes but she seemed far too drunk to take notice. "Hey, I think I recognized that bunny," she mumbled to no one in particular.

"Hey, unhand me girl before I lose my temper!" growled the lizard, his gaze hard and serious. Reisen's eyes were watering and her skin had turned an even harsher shade of white than before, if such a thing was even possible. Even the lizard was given pause. Reisen groaned and opened her mouth to beg or plead or perhaps to curse the cruel fates that had conspired to make her night even more unfortunate but instead of words a thick green stream of vomit erupted from her stomach, bathing the nearest unlucky customers in a random assortment of food bits and slime. "Urghhhhh," she moaned before throwing up again and again. Several beings held hands over their mouths or whatever equivalent they possessed. Expressions of horrified disgust were everywhere. Flandre wrinkled her nose at the terrible stench and she wasn't even that close. "Sorrrrry," Reisen mumbled who at this point had been reduced to her hands and knees.

The lizard's lower half had been blasted by the torrent of puke, turning his shimmering green scales into dripping green slime. He roared in anger and raised an impressively muscled fist but his outburst cut off abruptly as he slipped up on the icky pool that had gathered around his feet. He grabbed out to steady himself but only managed to bring down several nearby onlookers with him. They all fell down in a heap into the appalling soupy mess. Flandre might have laughed if the scene hadn't been so repulsive to her.

"Disgusting," mouthed Claudette. Paddy rose to her feet while gathering up the empty glasses. "So, it's my round right?" she asked, smiling. "I bet you two must be pretty thirsty after seeing that."

Marisa shook her head and whimpered. "Why did I keep looking? I'm actually feeling sober. Now I'll have to get drunk all over again." Claudette looked down at her wine glass and traced the edge with the tip of her finger. "Another glass of red magnificence will be the only thing that helps me forget this disturbing display. Quick Paddy. You're my only hope." She waved playfully to Paddy. "Shoe, shoe!"

Paddy grinned playfully and winked. "Sure bet," she said before turning around towards the bar. She hadn't taken more than a few steps before her path was blocked by a newcomer who had pushed herself through the pressing crowd to stand before the table. It took Flandre a moment to recognize who it was under all that frozen snow that covered up a lot of her clothing but those harsh looking yellow eyes and flashes of red maid uniform under the snow told her all she needed to know. Yumeko! She had obviously had a hard and miserable time outside in the freezing storm courtesy of Letty's particularly icy talents and wasn't looking at all happy. Her long blonde hair was crusted with ice and her teeth were chattering ever so slightly. Flandre waited with baited breath, hoping that the psychotic maid and shifty thief would take care of each other. And if one of them should survive the ordeal, well, then Flandre would be more than happy to step in and finish the victor off. Still, she wondered what Marisa would do? She didn't quite fancy Paddy's chances but hey, maybe she was full of surprises.

"Excuse me," said Paddy sarcastically who looked more than a little annoyed herself. Yumeko however was staring at Claudette with a cruel looking smile that could kill with the merest look. The expression was even colder than the patches of ice that clung to her body. "Hey, I'm talking to you," said Paddy, her blue bodysuit crinkling as her arm rose up to point accusingly at this unwelcome obstruction. "Get out of my way. I'm not as nice as I look."

Yumeko turned her steely gaze upon Paddy. Claudette had risen out of her chair at this point and shouted out a warning but Yumeko already had a gleaming silver sword gripped firmly in her hand. Yumeko brought the blade up with murderous intent but instead of

chopping Paddy in half the maid's nose wrinkled and she instead sneezed full force into her intended target's face. "Ewwwww!" Paddy exclaimed, wiping frantically at the sticky substance that covered her face. Marisa burst out laughing, either not noticing the sword or not caring.

Yumeko growled under her breath and hefted up the sword again, determined not to be made light of but before she could strike Claudette snatched a glass off the table and flung it at right at her face. The sword flashed quickly, blindingly fast and struck the object out of the air, shattering it into a million glittering pieces. Everyone close by shielded themselves as best as they could from the shower of glass shards. Several beings cried out as fragments stabbed into them. Paddy flung herself to the floor. Marisa ducked under her witch's hat and cried out in horror as her ale glass was hit by a stray hit. Claudette crouched under the table but had kept her eyes fixed firmly on Yumeko.

"Hey, that crazy bitch brought a weapon in here!" someone shouted from behind Yumeko. "Rule breaker," came another raspy cry. "This'a gonna be good." And so it carried on until all the many voices combined into a deafening chorus that drowned out any other noise within the vicinity. Sadly Flandre could still hear the music. Even so, Flandre found herself lending her voice to the chant, unsure of exactly what was happening but enjoying being part of it nevertheless. Yumeko suddenly looked unsure of herself and glanced around her at all the suddenly hostile faces. "Stand back unless you want to be cut a head shorter!" she yelled. When that threat didn't work she snapped her fingers and three figures pushed themselves out through the press of bodies to stand either side of Yumeko in support. One of them was a typical guard from the castle who looked to be suffering from a serious case of frostbite. His clothing was torn and ragged and some of his fingers had turned black. He had a haunted, lost look on his face. One was dressed in a black robe, his or her face and body completely hidden from view.

The last person was far more interesting. Dressed in a blue miko outfit, Flandre almost mistook her for Reimu but there were subtle differences that only someone who had met the real shrine maiden in the flesh would have picked out. Her facial features were more pointed, her eyes a darker shade, her cheeks seemed more puffy and her hairline was too fluffy and untangled. Or maybe that was just the weariness of the battering she had endured during the snowstorm. She certainly hadn't escaped the cold touch of frost that was for sure.

*Oh yeah, and her outfit is blue of course. That's a pretty big hit.*

The three figures that joined Yumeko must have been all that was left of the party that had set out in pursuit of the unwanted intruders. Marisa looked up from her sulking session just long enough to mouth the word "Reimu?" inquisitively before the crowd was violently shoved aside as the irresistible force that was Yuugi barged her way through the tight press of bodies like they were not even there and punched Yumeko squarely on the side of her face. Flandre could see the maid's flesh ripple as if in slow motion as the force of the hit distorted her coldly beautiful features before time caught up again and Yumeko was launched her off her feet and disappeared like a clap of lightening as she was hurtled into the bar at terminal velocity. Her sword clattered to the floor. Glasses of alcohol shattered and wooden fixings splintered in a loud explosion that many felt as well as heard. Yuugi cracked her knuckles and rolled her shoulders. "That'll teach someone who hasn't got the guts to fight fair and square and not play by the house rules. Isn't that right guys?" Everyone cheered wholeheartedly at Yuugi. Some even clapped. It seemed that was all one thing the bar denizens could agree on.

The guard that had accompanied Yumeko looked horrified that his master had suddenly and brutally been dispatched and started to panic. The storm had been bad enough for him but this was even worse. He fumbled at his sword belt, struggling to remove the weapon from it's frozen scabbard. "Damn it all. Get out you damn weapon! I don't want to die!" The hooded figure took a step back but



since they were surrounded on all sides there was no possibility of escape. The blue miko took a single but firm step forward and held aloft her Gohei, shacking it as if warding off any evil intentions towards her. "I am Reimu Hakurei," she said hesitantly with only a hint of fear creeping into her voice. "Stand back or-" but she never got to finished her sentence. The crowd had tasted blood and they weren't in the mood to tolerate anything further from these rule breakers. They descended on mass and swamped them in a shifting mass of bodies.

Claudette had seen enough. "I'll settle up next time we meet," she said to her two friends and swiftly headed towards the exit but Flandre wasn't about to let her vanish yet again. The vampire darted through the crowd on a course parallel to her target's. Flandre's vision turned into snippets of Claudette as she passed by the tight press of people. It was like a side show. Several voices yelled in surprise as Flandre ducked under legs or leapt over tables with a single bound. Glasses were knocked from peoples hands or in some cases tentacles but Flandre didn't even register the loud protests and fowl insults as she relentlessly cut a swath towards her goal. They were simply obstacles to her. She had her mind set firmly on one thing and one thing only.

The scarlet sister's twin multicolour wings created a split second trail of bright vibrant colour that trailed behind her as if she had streamers attached to the end of her scarlet red dress. She burst out of the crowd in much the same fashion as Yuugi had displayed so spectacularly earlier. An irresistible force aimed entirely at Claudette. Flandre tackled the thief to the ground. They rolled around on the floor, kicking and jostling for position. Claudette was slippery and elusive but in the end Flandre's strength and determination won out and she pinned her opponent's arms against the floor.

"You!" exclaimed Claudette. "What are you doing here?" She yanked her arms wildly but Flandre found it little trouble to hold the thief down. She savored the desperate look reflected back at her as Claudette realized she couldn't hope to break out of her predicament

with brute strength alone. "I've been looking everywhere for you," said Flandre, grinning without a hint of kindness on her face. "Sister wouldn't be pleased with me if I let someone take advantage of someone baring her name." Flandre bared her impressive fangs and emitted a faint hiss as she tasted the air. The brawl was still raging behind her but she was in her own little world now. Her vampire instincts were asserting themselves. "You shouldn't have wronged me. I only wanted to have some fun." Claudette winced in pain as razor sharp talons dug into her forearms.

"Listen," said an increasingly desperate Claudette. "You want your belongings back right? I've hidden them nearby along with my other prizes of the night. Let me go and I'll return them to you plus a few expensive trinkets as way of an apology. You won't gain anything by killing me!" Flandre reached down and snapped loudly at the air just in front of Claudette's face. The sound of that deadly guillotine closing shut made the thief shake and quiver with fear. "Maybe. Or maybe I'll just make you my slave you little bitch." Flandre tilted her head to sniff at her captives neck. "And then discard you the same way you did me. Does that sound fun?"

"No!" Claudette yelped as she started to kick out her legs in protest. "Be reasonable. Think for a damn moment!"

Flandre snarled. She had heard enough of this and plunged her fangs into Claudette's neck. Flandre felt the warm and welcoming sensation of lifeblood flowing around her fangs. But there was something else. Something foreign in the bloodstream. Some exotic drugs perhaps? For a vampire that was only used to prepared blood this was something new but rather than being repulsed at this prospect Flandre found herself mildly excited. Sadly she never got the chance to taste it as Paddy smacked a table leg hard against the back of her head. "Get the hell off of her you monster!"

For a second all Flandre saw was a white hot flashing as her brain rattled in its skull before her senses returned to her. She reluctantly released her prey and hissed at this insult, her eyes glowing with a fierce animal passion. For all her credit Paddy only backed away a

single step from the intimidating display in front of her. You didn't come to the Oni bar without steel in your veins. Flandre swore. Too late had she realized that Claudette was no longer pinned down and glanced back to see that a familiar silhouette was pushing it's way past several rather confused customers and heading in the direction of the exit. Flandre looked back at Paddy and growled with intense displeasure but with great force of will she tore herself away and pursued the shadowy mist that was Claudette. Paddy sighed with more than a little relief.

Flandre sprinted under the flashing glowflies mounted on the ceiling in glass prisons as everyone carried on drinking, chatting or fighting or in some cases a combination of all three. In her heightened state of mind the beings around her existed as tastes. Their perspiration, their breath, even their heartbeats helped to paint a picture of the most suitable and healthy individuals from which high quality blood could be found. Flandre ignored them all and homed in on that one familiar scent that she had only just recently tasted. It left a trail as bright and inviting as freshly baked cookies laid out all nicely in a line just asking to be eaten. Claudette's dark shroud that surrounded her body may work on the mere visual level and fool the unwary but she was a Scarlet and such a trick wouldn't work on her.

Flandre practically flew out of the exit and out into the open, hot on the trail of the ever elusive thief. So fast in fact that the burly Oni guarding the door stumbled backwards as the strong air wave surprised the ever living soul out of him.

*I know she has her belongings along with mine hidden nearby. She is probably heading to pick them up before vanishing again. There is no way that money grabber would ever think about abandoning her loot. All I need to do is follow her trail. I can feel that she is still close. Very close.*

Cirno and Letty had been waiting this whole time outside of the bar in the middle of a patch of trees. Cirno had been itching to tag along with Flandre but Letty had been quite firm in that it wasn't the kind of place that the little ice fairy's particular brand of mischief would be

appreciated. Currently Cirno was laying quite comfortably in Letty's lap while the winter Youkai told her old tails and stories and anything else that might help keep the hyperactive fairy from running of the stories Letty told was her time before coming to Gensokyo where she would create snowstorms and lure unwary humans into getting lost in the cold unloving winter. Tributes to keep the winter spirits happy were common during cold spells and Letty did so enjoy being remembered. Of course she didn't mention that she used to devour the occasional human to keep the others fearful but than again that was a different time. She sighed and silently caressed Cirno's blue hair.

It was still a cold dark night outside but such weather was nothing for beings that actively enjoyed harsh winter conditions that would kill most other creatures. Cirno had been waiting patiently for so very long so when Flandre called out into the night that she was chasing Claudette and that Cirno should follow her the fairy jumped at the chance. She looked up at Letty and trust her arms up into the air, almost hitting her companion by accident. Letty flinched back, her eyes wide and than sighed when she realized it was only Cirno being her little excited self.

"Yay Flan's finally come out! She must have found Claudette! Lets go chase the thief Letty! I bet I can catch her before Flan if I really try!" Cirno jumped up incredibly fast and clutched one of the trees tightly as she peered curiously behind it. Small ice crystals formed on the bark. Letty breathed new life into her purple floating ice shard that lit the darkness for the both of them and pushed herself to her feet. "Now, now Cirno. Lets just-" but before she could say anything further Cirno had shot off in the direction of Flandre's call with only the icy tree trunk to show that she had ever been there in the first place. Letty frowned and then smiled to herself. Cirno's boundless energy always made her feel all warm inside which was strange for a winter Youkai.

Meanwhile Flandre was flying gracefully through the trees as if she were a bird of prey. In many ways she was as she soared through

the night's sky in search of her enemy below. Flandre could see blue sparkles glittering behind her closely followed by Cirno calling out to her very faintly to slow down but the vampire couldn't risk losing the scent. She flew under a collapsed bridge overlooking a running stream filled with glowing eels and licked her fangs to keep the taste fresh in her mind. Cirno's blue hair flapped crazily around her as the wind pressure slammed up against her as she tried to match Flandre's insane pace. She waved her arms in a futile attempt to get her friend's attention. Cirno scowled and called out "Don't ignore me. She's ignoring me Letty!" The winter Youkai was gliding closely by and chuckled at Cirno's childish frustrations. "It just means that you need to try harder Cirno," she said before darting ahead of the fairy. The purple light that pulsed from her crystal bathed Letty's smile into something more sinister looking.

Flandre must have been flying for a good ten minutes now and already the all encompassing forest was beginning to reassert itself around her. It frustrated her that in order to safely navigate through this densely packed forest she was having to decrease her speed but there was no helping it. There seemed to be a large number of abandoned buildings in this area that had mostly been reclaimed by nature. Vines and shrubs spouted out of stone walls or wrapped themselves around the structures, effectively strangling them in greenery. Stone roads lay in ruins and here and there isolated grave stones could be seen scattered about the town, the names engraved upon them forgotten to time. Tall trees had had the time to grow within the very center of the ghost town suggesting that it had been abandoned for quite some time. Flandre would have liked to investigate but she hadn't the time to indulge herself. Not yet anyway.

Flandre slowed her frenzied velocity somewhat and peered intently into the night, sensing that Claudette had stopped moving. She picked the ruined hollowed out shell of a windmill and landed deftly on top of it and stared out into the surrounding blackness. The first thing that struck her was the almost deathly silence of the place. The usual ambiance of the forest was completely lacking here.

No animals shifting through the grass, no birds chirping. There was very little energy in the air which was very strange for a magical land like Gensokyo. Even though Flandre had very little experience of the outside world even she could tell something was wrong. Well whatever the problem Flandre was certain she had nothing to worry about. After all she was Flandre Scarlet and there wasn't much that could threaten someone like her. *That I know of anyway but I guess that's just part of the fun. Meiling always lectures me that there is always someone stronger out there just waiting for you to let your guard down.*

Flandre stared into the gloomy night and almost willed whatever was lurking in the somber depths to quit hiding and come out to challenge her. She smiled in the sure knowledge that the haunted forest was or should be afraid of her and not the other way around. "Flandre, hey!"

The vampire almost jumped out of her skin and spun around, claws outstretch but it was just Cirno who landed beside her and not the vengeful spirit of the forest punishing her for her insolence. Cirno's icy wings angled downwards to cushion her decent atop the ruined windmill. Her usual cheerful face was creased in an ill tempered scowl. "Why didn't you wait for me? I was calling you and don't you pretend you didn't hear me!" she said. The complaints went on and on after that and showed no signs of stopping. Flandre winced at all the noise she was making and covered up the fairy's loud mouth. Cirno mumbled through Flandre's fingers and struggled as if her friend was trying to suffocate her but Flandre rolled her eyes and cut Cirno off before she could resume her relentless complaining again. She stared directly into the fairy's eyes, almost face to face.

"Quieten down fairy! That thief woman is somewhere in this village. Somewhere very close by so don't have a hissy fit and spook her off. Understand?" Cirno mumbled something and then slowly shook her head. Flandre nodded back and cautiously released her, hoping that some sense had penetrated that wild excitable fairy brain of hers. Thankfully Cirno's competitive spirit overrode any sense of wrongdoing on Flandre's part and she grinned. "I bet I can find her

before you can Flan! I'll show you what a fairy can do!" Flandre couldn't help but grin back at her cheerful enthusiasm. The chase was on!

## Cloak and Daggers

Flandre stalked through the forgotten corridors and rooms of the abandoned village so silently that not even a single breath betrayed her presence. Strange glowing insects crawled across the walls and small furry animals carried on with their nightly business, completely unaware as the vampire so carefully picked herself between the dwellings. The temptation for Flandre to simply give in to the frustration and start blasting the dwellings one by one until Claudette was forced to show herself was all too real but Flandre reminded herself that it would be far more satisfying if she were to outsmart the elusive thief and sneak up on her completely unaware. Remilia had always said that stalking the night was one of a vampire's most skillful and graceful traits that any true vampire should take pride in.

Flandre peered around an open door frame before walking into what looked like the dilapidated remains of a kitchen. The ceiling had completely caved in and moonlight streamed in from above, illuminating the simple looking dining area. A ruined stonework stove lay in one corner while a dusty table and chair set sat unused in the middle of the room. Various knives and forks littered the floor as well as intruding vines that had pieced the dwellings floor. Flandre briefly wondered what had happened here to drive the humans (if indeed that was who had been living here) away from this dead and ghostly place. She froze mid-stride as she heard loud clattering sounds coming from the neighboring house but relaxed a little when the familiar sound of Cirno complaining reached her ears. *Is that fairy even putting any effort into stealth or does she simply not care?*

Flandre frowned and mentally shook her head. She could understand the urge to just blunder around like a topical storm until Claudette ran out of places to hide but at least put some effort into keeping yourself hidden! Thankfully she knew for certain that Cirno's rampage hadn't frightened the thief out of the area yet. Flandre still retained the taste she had experienced earlier when she had stuck her fangs into Claudette's neck. This allowed her to taste her prey's



unique flavor on the air and follow her tracks to some degree. Already Flandre could feel that that sensation was starting to fade. She had to hurry while the trail was still fresh!

Having finished searching the residence Flandre quietly slipped out of a hole in the wall and peered into the gloom. A nagging feeling at the back of her mind was secretly afraid that the ice fairy would somehow find Claudette before she did. With Letty helping her search it might just happen. *That would be so humiliating!*

Where to search next? There was a small wooden barn to her left surrounded by a short fence and a run down church that by some miracle hadn't collapsed to her right. Random stones were scattered among the grass. Flandre made a mental note not to trip up on them as she carefully made her way towards the church. Picking the church made her smile a little at the thought of a vampire entering such a holy place. She remembered sister telling her that churches were just buildings like any other and that it was the attachment that humans placed on the structure that made it a holy place. In a dead town like this it was just a hollowed out husk just like all the other houses. Still, she might find something interesting in there. Some hidden holy relic? Or a troublesome thief perhaps?

Something quick and small whooshing through the air caught Flandre's attention. She spun in the direction of the barn to see a extremely thin metal dagger speeding towards her. The way the scalpel like object glistened as it traveled betrayed the poison that coated it's length. Flandre ducked inhumanly fast and quickly ran into the nearest house, lest she attract any more of the deadly projectiles. She let out a small breath for just a second before doubling around the ruined house, using it as cover to shield her before she leapt over a great expanse of open ground that brought her to the barn's rickety back door. She listened intently. Nothing could be heard besides the irritating chirping of bugs. She peered through a jagged hole in the wood but couldn't see anything living let alone moving in the desolate barn.

That same faint whooshing sound that was barely audible prompted her to soar high into the air as two scalpel blades stabbed themselves into the wooden door and out the other side. *Playing games are we you filthy cur?* Flandre scanned the night as her mind worked quickly to trace the path of the blades. Somehow Claudette had changed positions from the barn while keeping Flandre in sight fast enough to get the drop on her again. Flandre might have been impressed had she not be so angry with herself for letting it happen not once but twice! *I'm glad sister isn't here to see this. Remilia would surely scold me.*

As Flandre hovered above the deserted town she scanned the surrounding area for any signs of movement, flashes of light or rustling leaves. Anything that might help her to find Claudette's position but alas it wasn't going to be that easy. Everything was as silent and empty as before with only the gentle swaying of the trees dispelling the illusion of total stillness. Flandre remembered the shadowy field that Claudette had been able to wield before and knew that finding her in the night would be a challenging affair even for a vampire such as herself. The scarlet sister snorted in contempt. *This thief clearly intends to fight from the shadows. Quite fitting for someone as cowardly as her to battle in such a manner. No honor at all.*

No further attacks came however as Flandre floated above the rooftops while contemplating her next course of action. *Probably because I'm fully ready and expecting it. Claudette seems like the kind of bitch that preferred to stab you in the back. That means that I have to put a little thought into flushing her out, that's all. Not a problem for the gifted little sister of the scarlet devil.*

Flandre considered using Cirno and Letty to aid her efforts but decided against it. She wanted to do this herself. She wanted this to be solely her conquest and not have to worry about that mischievous ice pixy getting in her way. Had she been totally honest with herself, Flandre might have admitted that she didn't want her newly found friend to be hurt in any way but she hadn't reached that level of

honesty just yet. Flandre turned her thoughts elsewhere. *Stuffy head maid Sakuya uses knives because they are silent unlike energy and cannot be sensed in the traditional way. Does that help me? Not really. I could simply blast apart the houses one by one but then I risk destroying my stolen bag along with whatever treasures Claudette has stashed within the village.* Flandre's eyes widened. *And besides, what if I accidentally end up killing Claudette? That wouldn't be any fun at all.*

*Oh, and Cirno of course.*

Flandre knew that people would often label her as an unpredictable little firebrand so she liked to dream up methods that didn't simply involve blowing stuff up when she was feeling a little more patient than usual. Some Youkai just didn't understand the complex thought process that went into every one of her spell cards. The complex and intricate formation that made any good danmaku attack effective while at the same time beautiful to behold. No simple psychotic could come up with such beauty.

A thought entered Flandre's mind and she grinned with smug satisfaction. *That's all I have to do. I'm sure it will work.* With her mind made up Flandre drifted down on her glowing wings and landed softly on the ground next to an old well. She casually glanced about her but noted nothing out of the ordinary besides the occasional yelp from Cirno off in the distance which her mind automatically filtered out as background noise. Next, the vampire resumed her careful search of the dwellings. She picked a nearby house at random and began to move around it as silently as a ghost. As Flandre slipped through the rooms and quickly darted from house to house like a hungry predator looking for it's next meal the real Flandre observed her clone with amusement from the upper floor of one of the more sturdier looking buildings.

If she didn't see the attack coming then even her superior vampire eyesight would be useless in finding her attacker. If, however, she were to observe one of her own magical clones under attack from a distance then it would be a simple matter for her to figure out the

attack's trajectory and pinpoint that worthless thief's location, shadow field or not. She almost giggled but managed to hold her tongue. No need to give the game away just yet. Flandre waited patiently as the minutes slowly passed. She licked her fangs absentmindedly, perhaps subconsciously the vampire was looking forward to the opportunity of putting her sharp fangs to some good use. With her blood bottle stolen along with her bag Flandre hadn't had a snack in quite a while. She mused that it would be quite fitting for Claudette to be the one to quench her thirst considering that she was the responsible for it in the first place.

Flandre's pulse quickened as she waited, her anticipation growing with every passing second. Her clawed hands flexed and carved vicious looking grooves into the wooden window frame that she was using as her vantage point. Come on! Why won't you make your move? Perhaps she has seen through me? A flash of panic shot through Flandre as she glanced behind her at the open doorway leading out into the remainder of the house but it was as dead and silent as the rest of the town. The vampire sighed and returned to her silent vigil as she wondered just how long she would have to wait.

Thankfully as soon as her beautifully crafted clone sprinted towards the next row of buildings a thin knife flew out of the darkness and hit its mark right in the back of the neck. The real Flandre winced a little at the spiritual feedback she received but it was nothing she couldn't handle. The clone had been formed using her own spiritual power and as such shared a close bond with its master. This allowed her to command it but also experience the clones senses and emotions. And to think that she had developed the technique in order to create playmates for herself during those dark days when she had been locked up in the mansion's basement all alone for her own and everyone else's protection. It had certainly proved a useful skill to have in many situations. Flandre suspected that even her dear sister Remilia couldn't make clones of herself though maybe that was because she had never tried.

While the poison coursing through the clone's bloodstream wasn't quite strong enough to cause her to keel over in shock Flandre allowed her doppelganger to fall to the ground to allow Claudette to mistakenly believe that she had won. Overconfidence would be her undoing and Flandre intended to be standing over her triumphantly when that simple fact finally made itself known. Having memorized the knife's flight path Flandre quickly but carefully glided down the stairwell on currents of magical energy and floated out of the kitchen's window. From there she pushed herself up against the side of the house and took a tentative look around the corner. Her clone was still laying right where it had fallen as still as a log. Claudette hadn't come out to claim her prize but Flandre wouldn't have expected her to let her guard down so easily.

Flandre frowned and sent a mental command for the clone to start withering and thrashing around in pain just to make the scene a little more picture perfect as she peered out into the night at the supposed position of Claudette. If Flandre was right and she was almost certain that she was then Claudette would be hiding on top of a worn down thatched rooftop cottage. Sure enough Flandre could detect the faintest flicker of shadow. A shade of darkness so subtly different from that around it that had Flandre not been specifically looking for something out of the ordinary then she would have totally missed the blackened sphere.

It rippled and shifted atop the cottage like it was some kind of mirror reflecting the darkness around it. Flandre concentrated as she tried to pick out something tangible such as a protruding foot or hand. Anything that would betray the presence of something living within the black sphere but even her eyesight could not piece the witchery at work here. Flandre observed the rooftop keenly as she commanded her clone to stop moving and play dead. She could still feel the faint sensation of pain and nausea that her clone was experiencing but it still felt distant enough for it not to bother her. Anyway, she wasn't going to let a little discomfort ruin her moment of victory. Her only concern was that Cirno would somehow blunder

into her perfectly crafted trap like a natural disaster and spoil everything.

Flandre tensed as the shadowy mass suddenly disappeared from the cottage's roof. Judging by the almost unnoticeable gentle swaying of the golden straw that coated the rooftop the vampire assumed that her target had carefully forced it's way through the soft material and into the cottage itself. Sure enough the hairs on the back of Flandre's neck rose up as grasping dark tendrils slowly slivered themselves out of an opening in the brittle building's wall which was closely followed by the large sphere itself. Flandre likened the mental image to some kind of living octopus cautiously feeling it's way out as it emerged from it's lair. She has to remind herself that this was only a facade. An illusion conjured up by a detestable manipulator. Nothing more than smoke and mirrors.

It approached the Flandre clone slowly as it shifted over a fence while hugging any available cover along the way. *I bet she's feeling pretty confident that I'm laying down there all helpless and vulnerable. That I'm at her mercy. She's probably going to gloat over me and laugh at my pathetic attempts to crawl away.* Flandre grinned as she surveyed the scene below from her second floor lookout. She placed her hand against the wall and readied herself with barely suppressed anticipation. The tension proved almost too much for her to handle. *Wait for it. Patience.*

A gloved hand hesitantly reached out from the shadowy sphere. Flandre recognized those fingerless styled gloves and scowled. Grasped in the hand was a extremely thin knife which could only be seen when it was held at a certain angle. Flandre had seen enough. Suddenly her clone disappeared in a static burst of brilliance that sent glowing particles of magic floating across the area. The hand retreated back as if something had snapped at it. Having pressed her hand up against the wall earlier Flandre didn't even waste a heartbeat in building up a large amount of power instantly that she pushed directly down across her arm and into the palm of her hand.

For a moment the monumental power held within her grasp threatened to break free like a massive body of thrashing water battering against a dam. With a smirk Flandre released the destructive force which punched cleanly through the wall, eating the stone away like it was nothing and smashed itself against the shadowy ball.

Flandre heard a muffled squeal of surprise escape the ball as it was thrown against the cottage's wall. Cracks appeared on the building's surface and rubble crumbled down from the roofing but it just about held the impact. Now that the trap had been sprung Flandre jumped out of the window and zoomed through the air on her glowing wings. The feeling of fresh wind blowing through her blonde hair and against her skin was extremely liberating after so much sneaking around. Like she had been finally unleashed upon the world after so long a wait. She landed right next to the dark sphere and shouted "surprise!" at the top of her lungs while making a rather rude gesture with her fingers that had earned her Remilia's scorn in the past. Up close the swirling blackness seemed to bleed and fold in on itself like it was in a constant state of flux.

For a long moment nothing happened and Flandre seriously wondered if perhaps Claudette had been battered unconscious by the collision and was floating inside her dark cocoon completely dead to the outside world. That is, until a bright glowing shaft of light pieced the sphere's surface and shot out at blindingly high speeds. Flandre only had time to widened her eyes in surprise before her body started to react on it's own. She leapt over the pulsing yellow shaft that stabbed harmlessly at the air she had just vacated and glided just above the cottage however the shaft twisted upwards and followed her. It looked like a snake with a faintly humming bladed head formed out of pure energy that coiled itself around to attack her.

"Nice try," Flandre breathed as she summoned her trusty blade laevatein in one outstretched palm. The twisted form of her twin headed blade felt comfortable and light in her hand as she swung it.

Sometimes she wondered if the twisted black form reflected her own personality. In any event the blade effortlessly cleaved the energy shaft in two, chopping the head off the snake and causing the main body to fizzle out and die in a spectacular display of bright yellow lightening that lit up the entire ghostly town. Flandre glared down with a malicious grin and rained down a barrage of long red energy spears that screamed loudly as they tore through the air. The area below her turned into a total apocalypse as whatever wasn't skewered by the red hot spears was blown to heaven as they exploded upon contact with the earth. The burning red glow reflected off of Flandre's grinning face, making her look like some kind of pyromaniac that was gleefully proud of her destructive work.

Out of the corner of her eye she spied something escaping the cataclysm. The sphere had survived but had not escaped totally unscathed. Parts of the shadow ball had been obliterated by the intense heat and several fires burned uncontrollably across its rippling surface. Flandre wasn't about to let it escape and took mere moments to appear directly in front of it, hitting the dirt with a confident aura like nothing could stand in her way. The sphere stopped suddenly like someone had taken the wind out of its sails. With the burning cottage behind the sphere Flandre could see her own distorted reflection on the shifting black surface. It wasn't often that she could see her own reflection given a vampire's natural aversion to mirrors and the sight gave her pause as she studied the warped image of herself. Suddenly realizing how stupid it was to daydream in front of an enemy Flandre blinked the thoughts away and concentrated on the here and now.

"Well, show yourself then!" she challenged, leaning forwards in a provoking manner. Flandre was already feeling extremely impatient and excitable so when she noticed the tell tell ripple of several thin knives passing through the sphere's casing she almost casually swatted them out of the air with *laevatein* before she started hacking and slashing at Claudette's shadow shield like someone possessed. "You cannot escape my clutches," she yelled as she slashed into her own mocking reflection. "Your feeble attempts to kill me have been



laughable!" She slashed down and across again and again. Each swing cutting away part of the sphere like dark blood. "Just give up and I might even be merciful." Flandre giggled as she drove the sphere back with her frenzied onslaught while shutting down the occasional counter attack.

Flandre hacked at the sphere until it had lost almost a quarter of its mass. Each part of it fizzled and died into mist as it came into contact with the earth. Not satisfied with the progress Flandre darted forwards and pushed her hand just inside the sphere and uttered a few words under her breath. The sphere suddenly turned into a giant water balloon as Flandre filled it with rushing wild liquid until it was bursting at the seams. It doubled in size in an instant and spasmed as it struggled under the intense burden. Flandre looked up in awe as it grew to a gargantuan size. Water was visibly leaking from several places now and a horrible creaking sound caused Flandre to shudder in the same way that someone clawing their fingernails over a chalkboard would. She winced and pulled her hand back but at just that moment the sphere exploded into watery oblivion.

Flandre screamed as she was swept away by the raging torrent of water. It seemed as if the town had suddenly been transported under the ocean but to the vampire it felt like she was being thrown around like a toy in a particularly powerful waterfall. The surrounding houses were instantly flooded and most of the weak and disused structures couldn't take the strain and collapsed in on themselves. Flandre opened her mouth to scream again but only succeeded in swallowing large quantities of water as the rushing stream forced its way directly down her throat. She thrashed her arms around in an attempted to steer her course while at the same time mentally cursing herself for getting carried away again and not thinking things through. Flandre could mentally picture Sakuya and Remilia scolding her for her lack of self control as she tried to figure out which way was up.

Cirno had heard the sounds of battle and had excitedly rushed towards it right down the middle of the overgrown street. Letty had

tagged closely behind, all the while trying to caution the icy fairy to not rush out unprotected into the open but her earnest pleas fell on deaf ears. Letty sighed and wished that Cirno wasn't so headstrong but the fairy was determined not to be left out of the action again. Cirno rounded a corner and stopped dead, her expression twisting into one of total shock. Letty gasped in surprise and unable to slow herself down, barreled into Cirno from behind. Cirno squirmed frantically under her as she desperately tried to pry herself free from under Letty's weight. "Get off'a me Letty. Why do you weight so much?" Letty scowled but before she could respond she heard the all encompassing roaring crush of water tearing away everything in it's path. Her skin turned an even whiter shade of winter as her mouth quivered with an unspoken scream.

Flandre felt like a fish fighting the current. Everywhere around her was a a deep shade of flowing blue. The nights sky might have been a beautiful sight from under the rushing water had she not been caught up in the eye of the storm. After a while the water level finally ebbed itself out and Flandre skidded unceremoniously to a halt in a quagmire of mud with a horrible squelching sound. The vampire hunched over and coughed up a large quantity of water. "Urghhhh," she moaned, shaking her head. The flood had swallowed up objects and scattered them all around her. Chairs, tables, bookcases. Even doors and window frames. A stuffed animal had washed up nearby and seemed to be staring directly at her like it somehow knew that she was responsible for the destruction of the village.

Flandre pushed herself shakily to her feet and shivered. The night's chilly breeze was unmercifully blowing against her skin. She had been totally soaked through which sucked considering that she had already experienced bone chilling temperatures once before this very night. Someone coughed nearby and Flandre glanced around to see a body sprawled out in the middle of a field of wheat. It was Claudette! She must have been snatched up by the powerful currents and spat out somewhere along the line just like Flandre had.

Flandre forced a smile and stumbled over to her. *At least I'm not soaking wet for nothing.* The wheat field was wild and untamed and hadn't been harvested in a long time. Besides that, it had suffered damage during the flooding and Flandre had no trouble walking through the collapsed crops. They rustled lightly underfoot. Claudette's black clad form looked up at Flandre as the vampire stood over her and made no obvious moves to escape. Claudette let out a heavy waterlogged sigh and coughed up a little more water before she managed to talk unhindered. "W-well. It appears as if this is t-the end of the game for me." A lot of thought's entered Flandre's mind at that point. A lot of things she could say or do, some darker than others but in the end she simply opted to kick Claudette hard in the ribs.

The thief rolled over and grunted in pain as Flandre struck out with her shoe a second time. "All I wanted to do was have a little fun but people like you think that they can take advantage of others and throw them away like trash without any consequences. Well, you messed up big time when you chose me as your victim. I am not a victim!"

Claudette looked up at her, a little blood dribbling from her mouth. She spat it out against the ground. "So, w-what are you doing to do? Kill me? If you do you will never retrieve your belongings. You gain nothing with vengeance. Let me make you an offer. I can-" Flandre cut her off abruptly. "Shut up bitch. You're in no position to bargain with me. I have you at my mercy and I'm very annoyed. Maybe you should start begging for forgiveness or do you have some kind of death wish or something?" Flandre crouched down and leaned over Claudette threateningly, her fangs in full view. A deep breath clouded around her mouth. *The nerve of this woman! Even after everything that has happened she still thinks she can talk her way out of this. She must think me a fool.*

Claudette held up a shaking hand in a feeble attempt to shield herself from harm and pushed herself away slightly with her legs but Flandre placed a foot atop her chest and pinned her down. "Wait.

Please. No good will come of this." When she saw Flandre's expression harden her finally got the message. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything I've done to you. Let me return your belongings to you along with a token of my apology. Please, give me the chance to make it up to you!"

Flandre tapped a taloned finger against Cladurette's nose and tutted approvingly. "There. That wasn't so difficult now was it? Now, I'm a little hungry," Flandre breathed, her face only inches away. She enjoyed the look of terror that was on display and drank it in like a fine wine. The Scarlet sister felt vindicated after such a long hunt. Now it was time to reap the reward. She lifted her head back and sunk her fangs deeply into Claudette's neck. The thief thrashed and spasmed and tried to pry the vampire away from her but Flandre found it little trouble to maintain her grip.

"Hey, Flandre. Where are you?" Cirno called at the top of her lungs. Loud enough to cause Flandre's heart to skip a beat. "Is that you over there? Did you destroy the village? Why do you have to destroy everything?" Flandre frowned, annoyed beyond believe. *Typical Cirno. Appearing just at the wrong time as usual.*

## Treasure Hunting

Fresh blood flowed into Flandre's mouth from the twin puncher wounds in her victims neck. It was a strange mixture that seemed laced with chemical mixtures that singed the soft surface of her tongue and made her feel a little sickly.

Still, she persisted. She had built up quite an appetite during her pursuit of Claudette and it just felt like poetic justice that the manipulative thief should provide her with a little nourishment. Also, she couldn't ignore the overwhelming instinct to feed on newly captured prey when the throbbing sensation of blood was right within her grasp. It just wouldn't be proper vampire etiquette as her sister would have said.

"Ewww, don't drink her blood, Flan!" said a nauseated looking Cirno. "You could get sick or something and it's making me feel lightheaded." Flandre narrowed her eyes and continued to feed as she tried to ignore the fairy's incessant complaining. When complaining didn't work Cirno turned to Letty for support like a squabbling child to a parent. "She's not stopping Letty. What if she kills that woman? I don't like her but I don't want her to die."

Letty patted Cirno soothingly on her springy blue hair in an attempt to calm her down. "There, there. She's a vampire, little Cirno. Don't worry, it's perfectly natural for a vampire to drink blood. If you don't like it you can always cuddle up to me. I don't mind." But that wasn't enough for the hyperactive fairy and the blue menace jumped around like a jack in the box while pumping her fists around and running her mouth off like usual.

Flandre stared darkly at Cirno and sincerely wished that she could mentally block out her childish ramblings. She loved having a friend for once but she was quickly learning that friendship came with its drawbacks. Besides, why did she care if Claudette lived or died? Hadn't the fairy been wronged as well or didn't she remember that

little detail? Claudette by this point could only put up a token level of resistance and Flandre casually slapped away an attempt to draw a hidden knife from within one of her black leather boots.

"Stop, stop, stop, Flandre! This is meant to be a fun adventure and killing people isn't fun for me, even if they are big meanies. There are other ways to get your own back on meanies. Let me freeze her into a statue or something. Don't turn into one of those old grumpy monsters without a sense of humor. You're not like that Flandre, I know it!" The earnest look in Cirno's gaze gave Flandre pause for thought. Rather than being irritating, this fairy was genuinely trying to save her from dirtying her hands. Just how naive could one fairy be?

"Cirno," said Letty with a forlorn look. "You shouldn't judge Youaki for following their true nature. Many of us were different before coming to Gensokyo. I've told you this before but I used to lure unwary travelers astray during blizzards. It was my nature just as winter is a force of nature." She smiled warmly at Cirno. "But I'm still the same Letty right? You still like me, right?" Cirno pouted and looked down at the waterlogged grass to escape Letty's disarming expression. "A vampire sucks blood. Don't be a little meanie and judge her, ok?"

Flandre had been listening intently to the discussion and sighed inwardly when Cirno glanced at her with those innocent eyes of hers. She knew that Cirno didn't consider her a monster or anything like that. After all, she knew that particular look well from harsh experiences in her past however she couldn't deny the fact that Cirno would think less of her if she stole the life from Claudette, no matter how deserving it might be. She wanted the happy go lucky fairy to laugh with her, cheer for her and jump around with excitement whenever something unexpected happened. It gave her an unfamiliar warm feeling inside her breast.

Flandre even enjoyed Cirno's constant wining on some subconscious level. At least she cared enough about her well-being to complain in the first place. With a grudging reluctance, Flandre released Claudette and wiped the sour taste from her blood soaked lips. She shrugged dismissively and looked up at the night's sky.

"Her blood was pretty repulsive anyway. I'll let her live for now, I guess." Flandre was still too proud to admit her true feelings.

Cirno however was not and couldn't contain her delight. She ran up and hugged Flandre so tightly that the vampire's body temperature dropped a full ten degrees. "Yay!" she cheered. "I knew you weren't like that!" Flandre gasped and squirmed like affection was somehow contagious. "Ok, ok. That's enough! Stop squeezing me!" The cold chill and embarrassment made Flandre feel extremely uncomfortable as she finally managed to free herself from the icy fairy's surprisingly strong embrace.

Letty clapped her hands together. "Ah, it's such a joy to see such a strong friendship. Cirno seems to have taken quite a shining to you, little vampire. I'm glad you took her feelings into account like a good friend would."

"W-what?" Flandre stuttered, waving her hands around. "No, no. You have it all wrong. I just didn't want to drink anymore of that horrible thief's putrid blood anymore, that's all." She turned around to hide her blushing face. "Don't miss understand the situation. And I'm not little. I'm probably older and wiser than you are." Letty smirked lightheartedly and looked into her nearby purple crystal that bathed her and the surrounding darkness in a surreal looking ghostly gloom. "You should be more honest with yourself," she whispered.

Flandre with her acute sense of hearing had no trouble picking out the words of course and grumbled something unintelligible. *Don't treat me like a kid. Stupid snow woman!*

Rushing water still pieced the sacred silence of the night as it tried to escape from the few remaining houses still standing. Cirno's shoes squelched audibly as she carelessly stomped around aimlessly. "Why'd you have to destroy the village Flan? Why do you always have to destroy things? That's not part of a vampire's nature, is it?" asked Cirno after she eventually wore herself out with her boundless enthusiasm. Flandre's wings flinched with trepidation and she swallowed guiltily. She didn't want to admit that a poor choice in

judgement had lead to her turning the town into a veritable water attraction.

"I-it was necessary, ok! I didn't mean to, I mean, I had no choice. And don't accuse me of destroying everything!" She pointed a accusing finger at Cirno. "You helped to wreak the fairy forest along with me, remember? And my name is Flandre, not Flan!"

Cirno scowled and jumped up on top of an overturned armchair that had somehow ended up right in the middle of the ruined street. "I'll say whatever I want! Flan! Flan! Flan! Flan! If you didn't want to be called Flan then you should have changed your name!"

*Unbelievable! The fairy goes from extremely heartwarming to insanely annoying within the same minute! Does she have a split personality or something? Why to spoil the moment.*

"Stupid! Stupid fairy!" Flandre exclaimed, throwing her arms up in the air in exasperation. "I'm not stupid!" countered Cirno who leapt off the chair towards Flandre and almost slipped up on the waterlogged ground in the process. "Now, now girls," Letty said, "shouldn't you worry more about what to do with your captive and less on squabbling? Flandre, didn't you say that you were wise earlier?"

Flandre glared at Cirno threateningly before turning her attention on the pathetic looking form of Claudette who was sprawled out on the ground shacking like a leaf in the wind. "Hey, thief? You still alive?" She leaned over the cowering woman and sneered when Claudette refused to meet her gaze. *Or perhaps she was hoping that I would leave her alone?* Flandre kicked Claudette hard in the ribs but she was careful not to break anything vital. After all, that would have been far too easy.

"Y-yes, I hear you," Claudette winced as she clutched her chest in pain. Flandre grabbed a handful of her sleek brown hair and mercilessly dragged the thief to her feet with no concern of how many strands she yanked out by the roots.



"Ouch, ouch!" Claudette yelped. She bared the pain and glared back at Flandre, a little of her former confidence creeping back into her voice. "Are you trying to scalp me or something? I thought you weren't going to kill me? If you're going to torture me to death than I'd rather you just get it over with and save me the agony."

Flandre stared at Claudette for a brief moment before opening her mouth and displaying her sharp dagger like fangs. The cool breath brushing against Claudette's bare and defenseless neck made the thief shiver despite herself.

"I think you should be very careful about what you say from now on. In fact, shutting your stupid mouth up might be the smartest move you make all night." Flandre could see that Cirno looked a little concerned at how things were proceeding but Flandre just winked at her and pulled Claudette's hair until her captive was looking straight at the icy fairy.

"Now apologise," Flandre ordered, her stern tone of voice suggesting that disobeying this command would be extremely unhealthy for her. Cirno grinned when she saw that her friend was starting to have fun again instead of descending into bloody revenge.

"Yeah, apologise!" Cirno yelled as she pumped her tiny arms into the air. "Apologise! Apologise!" Claudette paused for a moment and grumbled something under her breath before uttering a very quiet and unenthusiastic "sorry."

Flandre snorted and pulled back Claudette's hair so she could stare deeply into her soul with her glowing eyes. "You're not trying hard enough. Maybe I should have seconds? What do you think, Cirno?" The vampire looked to Cirno for guidance just in time to see Letty hand her smaller companion a snowball that she had apparently conjured up from thin air and nod to her encouragingly with a smile. Cirno grinned maniacally and arched her arm back. "Take this!" she yelled at the top of her chilly lungs.

The snowball smacked into Claudette's face with a satisfyingly loud thud which had the unfortunate side effect of flinging several pellets of snow into Flandre's face. "Ha! Take that, vile thief!" declared Cirno who hopped up and down around Letty like a child seeking approval for a job well done. Claudette grimaced as fragments of ice gradually detached themselves from her face but she seemed content to just stare daggers at the cheering ice fairy, for now at least.

Flandre on the other hand bit her lip with annoyance as she tried to blink out snow that had hit her squarely in the eye while at the same time resisting the urge to lash out at her troublesome companion. She muttered some dark words under her breath and instead unleashed her frustration against Claudette by shoving her forwards with a heavy smack against her back. "I'm tired of this. Lead me to your hideout and return my rightful belongings before I lose my patience."

Claudette quietly lead them through the devastated town while Flandre followed a hair's breadth behind her. Any wrong move; any sudden flash of colour and Flandre was determined that she would impale the thief with fiery retribution regardless of what Cirno thought of her. She wasn't going to go through the torment of hunting down Claudette for a second time. The buildings loomed over them as they passed like silent witnesses to their passing.

So focused was Flandre on reacting to the slightest disturbance that when Cirno prodded her in the back and asked her a question she almost jumped out of her skin. "W-what?" Flandre snapped incredulously.

Cirno skipped alongside her and tilted her head to one side. "Hey, no need to bite my head off, Flan. I was just wondered what happened to this town. Well you know, besides what you did to it." Flandre frowned as she glanced around and half expected some angry ghost to come out of one of the doorways and berate her for destroying their homes. "I don't know."

"I wonder," said Letty who was bringing up the rear of the group. "It's said that not all Youkai play by the rules. After all, why would we need a shrine maiden if we all behaved ourselves? We used to be predatory creatures once upon a time, whether we feasted on flesh or emotions. Perhaps some of us find it hard to forget that past life? Certainly, even the threat of the gap demon isn't enough for some."

"Gap demon?" Flandre wondered aloud. There was still so much she didn't understand about Gensokyo despite living the majority of her life here. It made her feel sad in a way as she thought of all the missed opportunities. *Sister did it because she cares about me. I know that's true.*

Cirno looked around at the ruined houses; the scattered personal possessions that now littered the ground. Her shoe crunched a pair of glasses underfoot and she stared down at them curiously. "Are you like that, Letty? I don't understand someone who does mean things like that."

Letty smiled at Cirno and rubbed her blue hair lovingly as they walked. "Occasionally, but don't you worry your mischievous little head about it. I'm fine. I'm still Letty aren't I?" Cirno nodded and hugged the winter Youkai passionately by rubbing her pale face in Letty's dress. Flandre couldn't see Claudette's face but she thought she detected a sneer from the manipulative woman. *Count your blessings that your still alive, worm.*

They eventually stopped at an overgrown greenhouse. "This is the place," said Claudette. Flandre eyed the place suspiciously, keeping a keen look out for any possible traps. All the windows had been smashed and broken glass littered the floor. Nature had invaded the stronghold and vines and branches had collapsed some of the structure.

Flandre prided herself on her excellent night vision but even her red eyes could not see any treasure of any description hidden among the wild plants. Similarly, her nose twitched but could not detect the familiar scent of her bag.

The vampire shoved Claudette and pointed angrily. "There is nothing there. Do not take me for a fool!" she snapped as she gazed at the thief with a cruel looking intensity. "It's underground you-" Claudette spat venomously but she caught herself before she said something she might later regret.

She breathed a defeated sigh. "The entrance is underground. There is a hatch hidden underneath a natural woven sheet of vines. Come, I'll lead you there. I'd just like to get this over with, peacefully, if at all possible. I won't cause any more trouble. I promise."

Flandre snorted contemptuously at that. "Sure. Well, that's up to you now, isn't it." She waved a clawed finger in front of Claudette's face before cutting the air across her neck with a sudden, vicious looking well placed swipe. Flandre relished the look of panic that spread across her captives face, the vivid picture appearing in her mind of her own bloody death. "Lead on," Flandre said innocently with a fanged filled smile that could melt the coldest ice.

Claudette gulped and quickly complied by revealing the entrance to her little hideout. "I'm not going down there," complained Cirno as she leaned over to get a better look. "It's dark, small and probably filled with worms and spiderwebs. Icky!"

But they eventually all descended after Flandre mocked her for displaying the usual cowardly traits of the fairies. The icy fairy didn't like that one bit and all but threw herself inside the hole like a speeding blue comet to prove without a doubt that fairies were indeed brave and daring.

The underground hideout actually lead into a cavernous tunnel that stretched out as far as the eye could see with many side passages that suggested that you could easily get lost if you were unwary. It was carved out of solid rock and looked natural in it's formation. Strange glowing plants that grasped around like probing tentacles provided multicolored light like some kind of natural kaleidoscope.

Cirno and Letty looked around the creepy looking cavern with a mixture of utter revulsion and wonder. Flandre however made sure to keep her gaze firmly fixed on the party's unwilling and unscrupulous guide.

"This is a tunnel formation that I discovered. A bit dirty and unrefined for my tastes but it serves it's purpose well enough. I hide my trophies and prizes safe and soundly within these immense caverns. Follow me closely if you do not wish to become lost."

*Yeah, I'll follow you alright. Extremely closely and with a clawed hand behind my back.*

"Yahhhhhhhhhooooooooo!" Cirno called, which reverberated around the tunnel loud enough to make the stalactites vibrate. Dust, soil and old webbing drifted down from the ceiling, some of which settled onto Flandre's beautifully soft blonde hair.

"Stop being dumb, Cirno!" Flandre snapped, "You'll bring down the entire cavern right on top of us with your powers of concentrated stupidity!"

"Now, now, Flandre," said Letty, disapprovingly. "Don't be unnecessarily mean. Cirno is just having a little harmless fun." Cirno cuddled up to Letty again and grinned in agreement. "Yeah, don't be a grumpy grumps, Flan! You'll get wrinkles!"

*Stop treating me like a child! Who do you think you are? You're not my mother or anything.*

Flandre bit down lightly on her tongue and thought better of voicing her inner thoughts. It would have only made her seem more childish after all.

*Still, I wonder who my real mother was? It's been so long that I can no longer remember what she looks like. I wonder if sister still remembers?*

Flandre had broached the subject to Remilia once before and her sister had reacted in quite a surprisingly evasive and ill-tempered way. Like she was personally offended that Flandre would even ask her such a thing. Flandre hadn't raised the subject again. She didn't want to sour her precious time with Remilia nor put her sister off from visiting her in the future.

She thought about these things while they navigated the many twists and turns that this maze of tunnels provided. She watched the way the colourful plants reacted whilst they passed underneath them, the way they intensified their rainbow of colour whenever a possible threat wondered too closely and thought of her own multicoloured wings. She watched the dripping of water as her spell of destruction touched the very earth underneath.

A sudden immense jolt almost shook Flandre off her feet. The cavern began to shake violently like it was in the grips of a tremendous earthquake. Flandre stumbled as fragments of earth and rock rained from the ceiling but the vampire managed to grab onto Claudette's arm and drag the both of them onto the ground. Even with the danger present, her first thought was in making sure that her captive didn't use the confusion to escape.

"What did you do this time, Cirno?" Flandre shouted to be heard over the ever present rumbling of shifting earth. A large piece of tree root dislodged itself from the wall and smacked into the earth. Slight cracks appeared in the tunnel and the threat of a collapse was all too real.

"I didn't do a thing, honest!" Cirno screamed back as she clung to Letty for support. "Don't worry, Cirno," Letty said as she manifested a cloud of pure snow above her head to give the falling debris a nice soft fluffy cushion.

Flandre cursed under her breath at having to shield both herself and Claudette but the decision was taken out of her hands as the overpowering seismic disturbance suddenly dissipated and subsided back to whatever force had summoned it. It turned into a low

rumbling like a growling animal before disappearing entirely. Flandre cautiously pushed herself to her feet. "Is everyone okay?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Still alive," said Claudette as she brushed down her tight fitting black clothing. "I didn't know you cared." Flandre rounded on her. "Don't get mouthy now. If I find out that that was somehow your doing then I'm going to snap both your arms, bury you alive up to your head and then collapse the tunnel for real!" Flandre dared her to say another damning word but Cirno was the one to break the uncomfortable silence.

"I'm fine, just a little dirty," coughed the icy fairy as she frantically brushed the dirt out of her hair. "What was that?" asked Letty as she carefully checked Cirno for injuries. "An earthquake? It seemed a bit short for a tremor. Perhaps this whole area is unstable." Cirno snuggled up against Letty as the winter Youkai ran a comb made up of crystal clear ice through her aqua coloured hair.

*Why does this recklessly brave fairy act so childish and needy around Letty all the time? I'll never understand the mind of fairies.*

Flandre shook her head and kicked the side of the tunnel which caused some loose earth to come toppling down from above. "I'd say we better get a move on. Lead on thief, before I lose my patience."

Thankfully after that it wasn't too long before they reached their destination. The glow plants became less and less frequent the further they went on until Letty and Cirno were increasingly reliant on Letty's floating crystallized ice lantern to actually see anything at all in the gloomy darkness.

Flandre was becoming increasingly suspicious of Claudette's directions so when she indicated that an offshoot on the side of the rocky tunnel was indeed the entrance to her long awaited hideout, Flandre's doubtful nature went into overdrive. This area of the tunnel network didn't seem any different from the other expanses of empty

narrow passageways so why did something feel different to her keen senses?

Flandre sniffed and detected a subtle difference in the air. A breeze! Yes, that was it. There was a slight breeze emanating from the tunnel that Claudette had indicated. She could feel it gently caressing her skin, like it was beckoning her onward.

*Maybe it has something to do with that earthquake? Or maybe Claudette has been leading us on a wild goose-chase from the start.*

"You go first," Flandre ordered. Claudette couldn't help but smile and did a little mock curtsy at the obvious display of mistrust. "Your wish is my command." Flandre scowled at her captive's disrespect and vowed that she would think up an inventive and cruel punishment as soon as her little pet thief's usefulness ran out. For now though the vampire was content to let her hatred simmer just under the surface until the time came to unleash it.

"Hey, Letty. Look, torches," indicated Cirno as the party progressed through the narrow offshoot that apparently lead to their long awaited goal. Letty commanded her purple ice crystal with a gesture to hover upwards in order to better illuminate the target of interest. None of them were lit of course. "Oh," she said. "It seems as though this passageway shows some signs of habitation. Does this mean our little friend was telling the truth?"

"Of course," said Claudette from the front as she ducked under a particularly low hanging section of the earthbound tunnel. "I would never lie to my new found friends." Flandre prodded her in the back with a sharp looking taloned finger. "Just remember, *friend* . I'm right behind you and I'm not in the best of moods right now. I would just hate if something bad happened to you."

*Unless I'm the one doing it.*

Claudette chuckled lightly but Flandre could hear in the tone of her voice that the thief wasn't exactly as confident as she might have



liked Flandre to believe. Satisfied that her point had been made, Flandre relaxed a little and passed the time by thinking up various forms of cruel and unusual punishments.

Nobody outside the scarlet devil mansion knew that it actually has a quite well equipped torture chamber. Flandre had been quite fascinated by all the unfamiliar implements and their strange workings the first time she had stumbled across it.

*Sister said that it was all just for show, that it was proper for a mansion to be fully furnished but I wonder? Perhaps Claudette has something like that in her collection? Wouldn't that just be delightful?*

Flandre tensed as she heard voices echoing down the passageway. Unfamiliar voices. From the subtle differences in body language, Flandre could see plainly that Claudette had heard the voices as well. Voices being the keyword here as the closer they approached, the more apparent that fact became.

"Friends of yours?" asked Flandre in a hushed voice. Her gaze was fixed firmly on Claudette's exposed neck and her whole body was tensed and ready for the slightly false move. "No," replied Claudette in a similarly hushed tone. "I work alone. I'm telling the truth here thought I wouldn't expect you to believe me. Also, that smell of nature permeating throughout the tunnel shouldn't be here, though I'm sure you are already well aware of that fact. Right, Miss vampire?"

"Hey, what are you two talking about," asked Cirno loudly enough to send a shiver up the vampire's spine. "Shhhh!" Flandre hissed. "There are multiple voices up ahead." She turned an accusing gaze towards Claudette. "Maybe some of Miss thief's friends." Claudette shrugged like she was privy to some private joke.

"Oh," Cirno whispered. "We going to sneak up on 'em?" Flandre nodded and placed a finger to her lips. "Yes, but quietly. Think you can manage that?" Cirno sniggered at the suggestion which the narrow tunnel promptly amplified into a raucous cackling chorus of

overly loud fairies. "Don't you know who you're dealing with, Flan? I'm mumph-"

Letty placed a pale hand over Cirno's mouth and nodded apologetically. "She'll behave herself, Flandre. I'll make sure of it." Flandre frowned at the fairy but nodded all the same. She glared at Claudette threateningly before she took her first step towards whatever it was that awaited them. Not too long after that, the tunnel started to boast wooden flooring. Flandre dimmed her wings to a low radiance and took each step carefully to avoid any unnecessary creaking.

A simple wooden door hung slightly ajar at the end of the passageway. Light flooded out invitingly from within. A sudden crash that sounded like splintering wood made Flandre jump and hug the nearest shadow on pure instinct. Voices joined the seemingly random melody of banging and colliding objects but Flandre wasn't intimidated at all. She wouldn't allow herself to be intimidated plus she was really really curious as to what was actually going on.

She crept stealthily towards the door while making sure that the untrustworthy thief remained well within the corner of her eye. Letty had placed a restraining hand on the unpredictable fairy's shoulder much to the vampire's relief. So with nothing left to do, Flandre tentatively peeked around the corner.

The first thing that stood out to her was the fact that almost the entire ceiling of this enormously cavernous room was missing. Shining moonlight shone down from the night's sky and the tapestry of stars was clearly visible from the heavens.

Trees that had up until this point lived peacefully on the surface had been violently uprooted and now littered the floor of this vast underground treasure trove along with various other pieces of nature that didn't quite manage to escape the destruction.

The second thing was that the room was jam packed with heaps and heaps of treasures of various forms. Well crafted statues, decorated

weapons, precious stones, exotic padded furniture, silks and expensive looking clothing as well as countless boxes and crates that promised even more riches within.

The last and most important thing of course were the two figures that lurked within. One was a majestic looking pink haired woman that gave off an impressive aura of otherworldly energy. She wore a lavish looking blue kimono, an oriental looking circular hat and was surrounded by shifting orbs of a strange ghostly light that routinely smashed themselves into nearby crates or collections.

"Oh my," she said in a whimsical tone. "I cannot seem to find that elusive object anywhere. Ah, this is such a bother and Yukari seemed so sincere when she told me that this would be a nice little fun interlude for me. Why do I get the feeling that I was somehow tricked?"

The other figure gazed around her with disinterest. She was quite striking with her nine shining golden tails that twirled temptingly behind her back. Flandre suddenly had an overwhelming urge to bury herself within that fluffy embrace and fall into a deep dreamy sleep. Her short blonde hair was covered up by a two-tailed hat. The figure's simple white robe gave her an air of graceful elegance and Flandre could see a large blue sash engraved with white murals tied firmly around her front.

*Just what exactly are they looking for?*

## Friends and Enemies

Flandre watched the two mysterious figures like a hawk from within the chamber entrance. Behind her, Letty was whispering something into Cirno's ear. Hopefully something that would keep the easily excitable fairy under control for the time being. On the other side of the tunnel was her good friend Claudette the thief who was watching the two intruders intently.

She was pressed up against the rock so that her tight fitting black outfit masked her outline perfectly. Her jaw was firm as she waved a stray strand of brown hair from her eyes. Flandre almost smirked as she imagined the angst that Claudette must be feeling as she watched her beloved treasure trove plundered and trodden on.

*If stares could kill. Well, serves you right you slippery eel. What goes around, comes around.*

Flandre almost wouldn't have minded had Claudette been outraged enough to rush in foolhardily. It would be useful to see how her new possible adversaries reacted and maybe she could use the confusion to slip inside and retrieve her bag without so much as a shout. Claudette of course had enough self control to simply watch patiently for now so Flandre let out a disappointed breath and did the same.

"We've been looking for ages and ages," said the pink haired one, her refined voice echoing around the cavernous chamber. Her frilly, blue kimono flapping lightly in the breeze. She shivered and looked up at the large, gaping hole that they had created in order to penetrate this underground cavern. "It's chilly," she muttered as she stared at the stars from deep within the crater.

"We've been here no longer than ten minutes," said the fox looking Youkai. "Please be a little more patient, Lady Yuyuko."

"I'm being very patient, Ran," replied Yuyuko, pouting with a trace of annoyance. "Very, very patient. You haven't seen me when I'm impatient." Ran frowned but said nothing as she busied herself with the search.

*So their names are Ran and Yuyuko huh? Ran looks and acts like a high class servant. Reserved and businesslike much like Sakuya. Yuyuko seems kinda spoiled but has an air of authority about her. And they're after something, something here?*

Yuyuko yawned as she smashed open another wooden crate with one of her semi-transparent, floating white orbs. Various worn looking books and old decaying scrolls spilled out onto the ground like entrails from a corpse. Her bored looking pink eyes reluctantly danced over the collection, noting nothing of particular interest. "This is so tedious. Looking for such a small item in this haystack?"

"Lady Yuyuko, we have been entrusted with this delicate task and should carry it out to the best of our ability," Ran replied as she shifted through a rack of gaudy but moth-ridden clothing. "Besides, the sooner we find it, the sooner we can leave this drab and dreary place."

"But it's just so boring," Yuyuko protested, sounding on the verge of tears. "I bet Yukari is doing something incredibly marvelous right about now. She always saves the juicy and exciting jobs for herself. How could she be so mean to one of her best friends?"

Yuyuko paused and absentmindedly twirled her pink locks in one slender finger. When she realized that Ran had no intention of joining in on the conversation, she huffed and continued. "Aren't you annoyed, Ran? Our magnificent power could be put to so much better use, don't you agree?"

"This is an important job and one that Mistress couldn't entrust to anyone else and while I agree that it might seem a little demeaning, maintaining Gensokyo's peace is often filled with tedium. There is a lot more to protecting the natural order of things than simple

violence. Who do you think cleared up the red mist after Remilia was pacified? It certainly wasn't Reimu."

The hairs on the back of Flandre's neck stood up at the mention of her sister's name.

Yuyuko fixed Ran with a knowing smile. "Could the answer be you, Ran? I don't know for sure but I'm guessing that she allowed you the gracious honour of clearing up the mist while she busied herself with more, how shall we say, pleasurable activities? Perhaps discussing important matters over at the Hakurei shrine with a nice cup of tea in hand?"

Ran face was expressionless however her many golden tails betrayed her agitation as they twisted themselves behind her back. "How did you?" she began before clearing her throat. "Did lady Yukari mention something to you?"

"No, no," Yuyuko chuckled. "She didn't tell me anything. I just know Yukari a little too well I suppose." With that said, Yuyuko yawned again and returned to her search by levitating a sparkling jumble of silver jewellery into the air.

She examined it intently for a moment before scoffing and sending them scattering randomly around the room like blinking daggers. Several pings sounded out as the projectiles struck solid objects. Flandre flinched as two landed near the opening she currently occupied.

Ran frowned and stood silently in thought for a moment before she too returned to the search. Her nine tails still twisting and turning behind her like an angry hydra.

While Flandre found the idea of eavesdropping on a private conversation deliciously naughty, she really wanted to hear more about her sister and less of the meaningless banter. While the Scarlet Devil mansion had been involved in the red mist incident, Flandre herself had been confined to the vast basement of Remilia's

lavish home and had only found out about the whole affair after everything was already over.

Overcome with resentment at the thought of being ignored and isolated, she had caused such a disturbance that it had caught the shine maiden's attention, occurring as it did, so soon after the red mist incident. That encounter had rekindled her desire to experience life away from her sheltered existence and escape the shackles of the mansion.

She hoped to meet Reimu again and had a feeling that holding onto this so called 'sunstone' might just make that wish a reality judging by the amount of Youkai and people alike looking for it. At the very least, it was valuable and seeking it out would provide the excitement that she so dearly desired. The fact that it was currently resting within her bag was only a convenient excuse.

The sound of shattering porcelain knocked Flandre out of her little reverie. Yuyuko had knocked over a statue of some great artist who now lay on the ground in broken pieces. Flandre could see the impatience in her careless actions. Like this duty was somehow beneath her. Someone like that could be easily distracted. She took a quick glance behind her to see that Letty was still tenderly coddling Cirno.

Satisfied that a certain ice fairy wouldn't cause any distractions, she again noticed the look of utter dismay on Claudette's face at the desecration that her collection of treasures was suffering. Standing just inside the tunnel entrance while biting her lip like that, Flandre wanted nothing better than to rub salt into the wound, to make her suffer like she had made her suffer. Sadly she couldn't do that without risking discovery so she that feeling slide for the time being. There will be an opportunity later, she told herself.

Yuyuko's orbs of white light shimmered as they worked their master's will. They seemed to fade in and out of reality, like they were simultaneously alive on both planes of existence at the same time. There was something ominous about them. Something that Flandre

couldn't quite put her finger on. That and the fact that she would have to contend with whatever Ran had to offer kept her within the covering confines of the tunnel.

Even destroying priceless works of art had seem to lose its appeal as Yuyuko yawned and rubbed at her eyes. "This is so boring," she mumbled. She stepped up to a giant looking throne that was padded with purple silk and sat down with a sigh. With one hand she toyed with the curls of her pink hair and with another she fumbled in a nearby wooden box full of miscellaneous items, like a queen fed up with her daily duties.

"I wonder if there is something to eat around here," she said to herself as she pulled out a what looked like a gold plated music box. Disappointed with her new found trinket, she tossed it over to her glowing orbs which proceeded to tear it apart in spectacular fashion, like a pack of hungry piranhas toying with a meal.

"Please, Lady Yuyuko," Ran said from across the treasure chamber. "Do not accidentally destroy the item we've been searching for all this time. I'm sure that would irk you more than simply spending the required time to find it."

Yuyuko yawned again and fished out another item, this time a cute looking bag with a cloud motif. She dangled it in front of her with utter disdain, as if this object was somehow responsible for this whole sordid affair. "Ahhhh. I knew I shouldn't have skipped lunch. Youmu makes such lovely roasted lamb with homemade gravy. She really puts a lot of love into every meal."

Flandre's eyes widened as she gazed at her bag being casually tossed around in Yuyuko's hand. With every passing moment, her heart felt like someone was stabbing it with a thin needle as she imagined her blood bottle cracking and spilling it's contents within her favorite carrying companion. She told herself that she had to stop hesitating and do something!



Ran displayed none of the frustration that her associate did, at least outwardly, however certain parts of her anatomy twitched and twirled whenever Yuyuko opened her mouth to voice her very frequent grievances. The fox let out a small breath and looked up to see that Yuyuko was about to throw the bag to her ethereal spirits when she suddenly looked energized and alarmed. Her reserved and businesslike demeanor cracking instantly.

"Hold on a second, Yuyuko!" she yelled, not adding the proper honorific for the first time. "That bag! Don't destroy it! I believe it contains what we are looking for!" Ran's long sleeves flapped as she pointed at Yuyuko.

Yuyuko looked somewhat surprised but didn't seem to have the enthusiasm for her to display much in the way of emotion. "Oh really? This old tattered thing? It doesn't even have any hand straps. Besides, how can you tell what's inside, Ran? Could it be that you secretly want this bag? I won't tell Yukari if you want a few souvenirs."

Ran frowned at Yuyuko's candor.

"I want no such thing and the reason I know what's inside that bag your holding is because I memorized the particular feel and presence of the stones in question. I dearly wish that you payed more attention Lady Yuyuko when my master was outlining our duties. This is more important then you make it seem. Anyway, please hand me the bag and we can finally leave this place."

Yuyuko seemed to perk up at the idea of leaving and smiled warmly. "Sure, Ran. I'll save you a spot at my table if you promise to behave yourself." She giggled. "You cannot handle your sake, after all."

"Please, Lady Yuyuko. You know that isn't true."

Hiding in the mouth of the tunnel, Flandre knew that now was the time to strike if indeed she wanted any hope of recovering her bag

and seizing the sunstone for her continued adventuring. But how was she to go about it?

Try to combat these two unknowns with as of yet, unseen abilities? Perhaps her icy friends could help her? She still had to worry about that backstabber Claudette. Silencing the thief would cause more sound and disturbance than she would like and she didn't have the time considering she was sure that it would take more than a few seconds of work.

Flandre grinned as she thought of a convenient solution. She placed a hand against Claudette's back and eagerly shoved her with all of her considerable strength out into the open. The thieving woman just had enough time to glance backwards in surprised outrage before she was propelled out of the opening like a sacrificial lamb.

She grunted as she hit the floor in a cloud of dust and banged her fist against the floor in a bout of maddened anger. Yuyuko and Ran turned as one to gaze upon this uninvited guest, their gazes harsh and unforgiving.

Flandre grinned with the cruel glee of someone who had just shoved someone into the path of an oncoming train. Claudette visibly paled under the extreme scrutiny and with caution, slowly rose up to her feet.

"That was mean," Cirno whispered into the vampire's ear. She flinched as the cold breath entered her earlobe and wished that Cirno wouldn't do that. It was like someone giving you a bad case of brain freeze or if someone suddenly decided to fill your ear up with ice cubes.

"Shhhh," Flandre hissed, not wanting to give the game away. "Just watch."

The cavernous treasure trove that was so familiar to Claudette seemed a lot more unwelcome and oppressive all of a sudden. The

usually inspiring sight of her many trophies that stood as a testament to her skill offered cold comfort indeed.

The walls seemed to press in, appearing closer than they actually were. She cursed the vampire under her breath as her mind searched for a possible way out.

"Hmmm," Yuyuko mumbled. "Who do we have here? Another one of Isabelle's lackey's? Or perhaps just an unfortunate soul stumbling into the demons maw?" Yuyuko giggled, clearly glad at this welcome distraction after all that monotonous searching. "Well, which is it?"

Claudette steeled her heart and picked her words carefully while subtly letting her hands fall closer to her concealed weapons. "I was taken captive and pushed out as bait. The real perpetrators are hiding behind that opening over there." She indicated with an outstretched finger. "Please, save me! They want to steal all this treasure."

Yuyuko perked up with interest at the mention of possible kidnappers but was also far too wary to believe someone outright. "Hmm," she mumbled, her voice rich with amusement. "Sounds a bit far fetched to me." She pursed her lips together.

"Well, I guess I don't mind too much since you look nice and tasty. The apprehension and fear that you seem so intent on trying to hide is quite delectable."

Ran sighed and shook her head, her tails still beating restlessly compared to her calm demeanor. "Please, Lady Yuyuko. If you're going to indulge yourself, at least hand me the sunstone. I do not wish to keep Lady Yukari waiting if at all possible." Claudette stood watching the exchange, limbering up her body to flee at the slightest hint of danger.

"Ahh, fine then," Yuyuko exclaimed as she casually tossed the bag towards the impatient hands of Ran Yakumo. Like a flash of lightening, Flandre whizzed out of the cavern's entrance with Cirno

propelling her still further on a blossoming of bright and crackling snowflakes.

The room's atmosphere was suddenly plunged into a deep winter mist as Letty extended her powers over the expanse. Before the air became complete engulfed, Flandre pushed herself away from Cirno and dived down to snatch her bag in midair.

The daring vampire hit the ground with a thump and rolled to her feet, the thick, white mist obscuring the cavern in an unpleasant chilly cloud that her eyes could barely penetrate. She heard several alarmed and confused voices and concentrated on finding the entry tunnel.

Letty's smokescreen was proving to be far more effective and troublesome than she had originally hoped for and had she had obviously overestimated her own eyesight. Flandre remembered how dense and fierce the winter Youkai's raging blizzard had been and cursed herself and Letty for this annoying situation.

A purple light could be seen pulsing faintly in the cloud like a welcoming lighthouse on a stormy night. Flandre recognized it instantly as the purple crystal that Letty used to guide herself through the almost impenetrable darkness of Gensokyo's nighttime. With all her ill feelings towards Letty instantly forgiven, Flandre sprinted towards the narrow tunnel, her shoes kicking up half frozen ice as the earthy ground began to crystallize and harden.

Flandre gasped and skidded to an abrupt halt as the imposing looking form of Ran suddenly appeared in front of her, blocking her escape. She was far larger up close and towered over Flandre by a few heads worth of height. Her many swaying tails in the heavy, cold cloud caused her silhouette to look more like some menacing, multiple tentacled monster out of some childhood nightmare.

A low growl passed through her lips as she extended her arms out to either side of her, challenging anybody who dared to pass. Flandre had let her free hand slide down to her hip however before she had a

chance to act, a blue frantic fairy leapt out of the fog and jumped into the bushy, shifting mass of Ran's tails.

"Hey, get off me you little-" Ran yelled as Cirno grabbed hold of her golden tails. Flandre heard Cirno mumbling something as she struggled in the shifting mass but it was totally muffled by the grasping fur. It looked like she was being swallowed up by a giant bunch of carnivorous bananas.

Ran was shaking her hips frantically in a desperate, almost comical attempt to shake the fairy free. Up this close, Flandre could see that the way she was blushing and moaning in distress suggested that her nine tails were quite sensitive. That, or Cirno was just playing rough.

Flandre took her opening and smashed Ran in the chest with a concentrated blast of indigo coloured flame. Sparks flew as the intense heat struck home. The Kitsune grunted and was thrown against the stone wall, smoke rising from her crumpled form.

Her twirling tails looking very much like fire as they twitched in the air. Flandre didn't waste any time and rushed past her, making sure to grab the still squirming Cirno from Ran's furry clutches. The vampire felt strangely forlorn all of a sudden.

*I would have liked to experience those fluffy tails. Stupid lucky Cirno.*

"Wait," she heard Ran's angry voice echo down from the treasure room. Tenacious little fox, Flandre thought. Most adversaries would have been crippled for a good while after such an unguarded strike.

"Hey, let go of my hand!" Cirno yelled as she was dragged at high speeds back down the narrow tunnel that they had navigated just moments before. Both of their wings glowed with vibrant colours, turning the underground passageway into a kaleidoscope. A multicoloured light dragging a pale, twinkling blue star behind it. Flandre hoped that her sense of direction was still alive and well.

"You're going to tear my arm off, dumb dagger mouth!" Cirno complained as she struggled to avoid falling over as she was treated like compact luggage. Flandre scowled and released her. The sudden lack of momentum almost caused Cirno to fall over flat on her face but she just about managed to keep herself surefooted.

The icy fairy scrunched up her face in annoyance but was moving too quickly to put up too much of a fuss. Flandre ducked under some withered roots that dangled down from the roof of the tunnel as she tried to piece together her mental map. A shiver went up her spine as she heard Yuyuko's haunting laughter which seemed to lightly shake the loose earth surrounding her.

Was it the next left or that little side passageway that we already passed on the right? Damn, this place is so filthy and every pile of dirt looks exactly like any other.

"Umm, Flandre," Cirno called out from behind her, her own fairy voice amplified by the narrow confines of the tunnel. "We need to wait for Letty! She cannot keep up with us!"

Flandre glanced behind her and saw the familiar faint purple glow of Letty's crystal right at the edge of her vision. She couldn't see the actual winter Youaki herself however which suggested that she was indeed lagging behind and might be caught if nothing was done. She could however see a dark, shadowy shape shifting just behind the icy blue shimmer of Cirno.

Claudette noticed the Scarlet's gaze and peered out from her covering shield of darkness to wink tauntingly at the vampire, reminding her that she wouldn't be rid of her so easily. The narrow tunnel was alive with speeding competitors, almost like a race. Flandre was out in front, trailblazing her way to victory however she ginned as yet another convenient solution appeared in her head and deliberately slowed her rocketing pace to fall behind the aqua star of her fairy friend.

The black, shifting, chameleon-like shroud came closer and closer. In the pitch darkness it would have been impossible to even sense without the luminescence provided by her wings. Further down the earthen bound corridor Flandre could see pure white butterflies of a most brilliant shade of white fluttering alongside the walls. It was a unblemished, holy light that caught your attention like a roaring beacon.

Flandre blinked once and summoned Lævateinn out of the shadows which helped to push the butterflies almost hypnotic beauty out of her mind. She had no doubt that those bewitching manifestations belonged to Yuyuko. Flandre might have found the pale creations of energy beautiful if she had had the time to properly admire them but she could tell from her small glimpse that they had strange and potentially dangerous magics attached to them.

Letty, who seemingly couldn't keep up with the frenetic pace set by her two companions found herself uncomfortably close to the creeping white wings however her face was surprisingly calm under the circumstances.

Almost as if she was determined not to be a burden on anybody else by asking for help. Her purple crystal was still pulsing it's guiding light and was now tied around her neck by a thin string of ice, illuminating the grim but firm look of her face.

Flandre wanted to protect her for Cirno's sake. She had seen the pleading, heartfelt look in her deep blue eyes and acted almost without thinking. That surprised her a little but she rationalized it by telling herself that revenge was an added bonus that sweetened the pie of acting the selfless hero.

All at once, Flandre stopped dead, hovering in midair. The shockwave and loud clap of air pressure associated with such an abrupt stoppage of momentum made the vampire's teeth chatter. Her internal organs uncomfortably pressed themselves up against her rib cage and blood rushed up to her head, making her vision a little blurry.

She grinned and bared the unpleasant sensations. Such an accomplished danmaku duelist as herself had no trouble executing such punishing maneuvers though she tried to not make them a habit.

Claudette was taken totally by surprise at the sudden appearance of the smirking vampire that was now eagerly blocking her path. She attempted to shift her course and pass under this dangerous obstacle, using her cloaking shadow coat to her advantage in the dank nothingness of the tunnel but Flandre's red eyes could see the reflections from the white butterflies as they danced across her shroud, revealing the location of the hated thief.

With her target clearly illuminated, Flandre gripped Lævateinn with both hands, her gaze firmly set on the shifting black shadow before her. The demonic blade vibrated within her grasp with barely restrained power as Flandre brought the blade down right in front of Claudette. She knew that her target would most likely try and evade the attack so she simply made it unavoidable by striking the air in front of her instead.

The fierce shockwave of crackling black snakes of lightening knocked the black shroud hard against the floor. Flandre heard a muffled grunt of pain before the shroud was dispelled under the force of the impact combined with the magical interference of the strike.

Claudette looked beaten and dizzy as she looked up at Flandre while rubbing her forehead where it had struck the hard earthen floor. Flandre winked at her and while she would have liked nothing better than to see Claudette suffer somethings were best left up to one's imagination. With that, she zoomed back down the tunnel with a multicoloured thunderclap before the creeping white butterflies overtook her as they morphed the pitch black walls of the passageway into a ghostly white vision of heaven.

Flandre faintly heard the whimsical chuckling of Yuyuko as her voice was carried along by echoes before the winding cave network was filled with the haunting, strained screaming of Claudette. The loud



yells both filled Flandre with a sense of well deserved fulfillment and apprehension at the same time. She was happy that the hated thief was finally getting her just punishment but felt a little melancholy at not having been the one to dish it out herself.

Still, the screams had taken on an almost inhuman quality to them and Flandre was quite sure she heard the chilling sound of cracking bones which made her stomach feel a little uneasy. She didn't exactly know what was taking place but she had a gut feeling that she wouldn't have to suffer Claudette's presence ever again. She frowned and pushed on, eager to meet up with the others.

*Well, that takes care of that, I guess.*

"Ah, there you are," greeted a happy looking Letty as Flandre emerged from the depths of the underground tunnels like a reborn phoenix of flame. The grasping plants in the broken greenhouse were smacked with air pressure at the vampire's return, their many thin branches and vines swaying back and forth under the battering of wind. Their moist green limbs appeared to be attempting a mockery of dance, as if they were celebrating the triumphant return of the scarlet vampire.

Flandre landed on the floor and stood up, taking in the welcoming sight of the nights sky through the shattered remains of the greenhouse's windows. She hadn't realized how much she had missed it after being trapped in the dirty underground for so long. Cirno looked ecstatic and wrapped her arms around Flandre who squirmed under her cold embrace.

"Thank you for helping out Letty, Flan. I knew you were a good friend to have."

Letty smiled warmly and joined in on the group hug with one of her hands brushing against Flandre's soft, blonde hair. "It was a really nice thing that you did, Flandre. You didn't have to help me back there. You have my thanks." Her heartfelt words and hugging arms

were comforting to the vampire and she was glad that they were too close to notice her blushing.

While their touch was cold, their words were warm and filled Flandre's heart with a sense of fulfillment. She was immensely glad that her own violent and impulsive tendencies could win and strengthen friendships instead of earning her scornful and fearful looks.

Her prideful nature that she had inherited from her sister urged her to reject this childish and demeaning display of affection but how could something that felt so nice be a bad thing? She often wanted to cuddle up to her sister and fall asleep while telling her of all the marvelous things that she wanted to do but knew deep down that she would be rejected and so bottled up all that resentment until she couldn't contain it any longer.

It was at those times, when it all became too much for her that she earned her reputation as the troublesome sister. Why couldn't they understand that despite living for around 500 years, she still wanted to have slumber parties with friends, pillow fights, throwing food and painting funny marks on peoples faces as well as simple heart to heart talks with family members that cared about her. While she knew her sister loved her she suspected that she was often viewed as an inconvenience and she hated that fact.

Flandre found that she couldn't reply to the charming display of affection and simply enjoyed the sensation of the two winter Youkai rubbing up against her. She even didn't object to Letty running her chilly fingers through her finely combed hair. She closed her eyes for a moment and imagined that she could feel their heartbeats and felt connected however she knew that they needed to move and soon before Ran and Yuyuko followed them back outside.

She gave herself a few seconds before lightly pushing away the display of affection. Her eyes were watery and she feared that she might cry, something which she hadn't done for many, many years so she pinched her forearm and used the pain as a distraction, an

escape for her feelings. Now wasn't the time to indulge in such sentimentality.

"Well, we all need to look out for each other, right?" Flandre replied, not trusting herself to say anything further. She beckoned them both to follow her as she started to move towards the exit of the greenhouse while taking care not to step on the overturned plant pots and broken glass that littered the pavement floor.

As the three left the ruined village behind them, Flandre glanced behind her at the empty buildings. So much had happened in such a short amount of time. Both outside in the material realm and inside her own heart.

She couldn't exactly explain why she had acted to help someone that she hardly even knew and that had been responsible for that tormenting blizzard but perhaps some things didn't need to be made sense of. She had always been the type to act in accordance with her own feelings and that was just the way Flandre liked it.

# Kourindou

Flandre enjoyed the sensation of the cleansing wind as it ruffled through her soft, blonde hair. It felt liberating after being cooped up in that underground hellhole for so long and narrowly escaping the clutches of yet more troublesome Youkai. Flandre still felt a little dirty and desperately wanted to change her clothing but unfortunately that was one luxury that she was going to have to live without for the time being.

They hadn't encountered anyone else since leaving the ghostly village and had been too preoccupied to decide on a proper destination so they had simply picked a random direction and flown off into the horizon. Still, the night was beautiful. The stars were tinkling up above in the night's sky like they were wishing her good luck with every wink. The wind was a little chilly but was still a godsend after navigating that filthy tunnel complex.

Now that she had the time to observe them more closely, the stars seemed to be flashing a lively variety of colours, much like her own wings. Perhaps stargazing was different when away from the mansion. The ground below her was completely devoid of life however the strange calls of distant animals were an ever present backdrop to her travels.

Flandre scanned the nearest mass of bushes but couldn't detect any movement. The calls were unfamiliar to her, a unsettling mixture of an owl's hooting and the grating sound Sakuya made whenever she felt the need to sharpen her many deadly knives.

Cirno howled like a banshee and performed a poorly executed barrel roll while diving perilously close to the dreaming vampire. Flandre saw a rushing blue blur flash past her as the fairy's childish laughter bombarded her eardrums. Avoiding the living homing missile set Flandre's nerves on edge.

"Damn it, Cirno. Stop screwing around!" yelled Flandre but Cirno just shamelessly grinned at her and continued her series of amateurish, airborne stunts.

"Flandre!" exclaimed Letty as the party of three glided over an open grassy field which would have been full of wildlife had it been not been the dead of night. "Those two Youkai that you described to me. They sound frighteningly familiar. And they were after that 'sunstone' as they put it? I think you should give it up and hand it over to them without any more fuss."

"What?" Flandre replied, incredulously. "I'm not handing it over. It's mine. Finders keepers as far as I'm concerned." It was inconceivable that a Scarlet would give up and play dead just because someone threatened them. Remilia would have been appalled at such a display of weak character and Flandre had no intention of shaming the family name.

"I don't think you quite understand who those two actually are and what their involvement means," said Letty as she drifted closer to Flandre on pulses of cold energy. Her tone reminded Flandre of a school teacher, and not in a good way.

"If you choose to put yourself in danger than I cannot and have no right to stop you but I will not let Cirno get caught up in whatever crisis the gap demon is currently embroiled in. That is a little too much danger for my liking."

"Hey," Cirno cut in as soon as her name was mentioned. The icy fairy, who up until this point, had been amusing herself by performing various aerobatic maneuvers made her presence felt by flying directly over the ongoing conversation so that she couldn't possibly be ignored. She looked down at Letty, her cheeks puffed up in a scowl.

"I heard you talking about me, you know. If Flandre can handle something than that means I can too."

Letty sighed and looked down at the earth below. "Please, Cirno. You should listen to me once in a while. I'm only trying to look out for you. Not everything in this world should be treated like a game."

Cirno bobbed around angrily in the air like a pressure cooker waiting to explode. Her icy wings were beating the air furiously enough to freeze little tear drops of ice out of the nighttime sky. Flandre could hear her friend mumbling under her cold breath. She was clearly not happy at the assertion that this little escapade was over her tiny head.

"So who were they?" asked Flandre in an attempt to distract the fairy's hyperactive meltdown. Well that, and she was genuinely interested in what mysteries Letty would be able to reveal. She knew so little about the workings of Gensokyo despite living in this strange, spiritual land for most of her long life.

Letty peered at Flandre and had a curious look on her face that suggested that she was debating the very notion of sharing her knowledge. The vampire glided alongside her and waited patiently for her to relent. Letty's crystal which she used to help navigate the inhospitable darkness was shining weakly. The purple light was much more subdued than usual and Flandre realized that it must be to help mask their presence from any unwanted attention. She silently chastised herself for not doing the same thing with her own luminous, crystal wings.

*Was Letty really that worried?*

"Ran Yakumo is the Shikigami that acts on behalf of the gap demon." Letty paused for a moment in thought and closed her eyes. "Ah, perhaps I shouldn't refer to her as that anymore, after all, she might be watching."

Flandre had a sudden urge to look over her shoulder despite flying high above the ground.

"Her name is Yukari Yumuko and she created and maintains the border that separates Gensokyo from the real world, although you could argue if either world is really less real than the other. Anyway, she is a very important figure in this land and as such, any problem that she becomes involved in is a problem that is best avoided. After all, she also has a reputation as a trickster and not one to be easily trusted. This whole affair might be some kind of ruse, some pretext to trick someone else."

Flandre flew through the air as she listened to Letty's explanation. So many things that she wasn't aware of. As the refreshing wind flowed throughout her hair yet again, she realized that going against the flow of the wind might be a nice little analogy for her current actions.

Going against Ran and by extension, Yukari, might be going against the natural flow of Gensokyo. Did she really want all that hassle? This was only meant to be a night's time worth of excitement and exploration, not a battle with forces beyond her comprehension.

Letty continued. "Yuyuko is the princess of the netherworld and is responsible for maintaining the balance of life and death. That is to say that she governs and guides the souls that for whatever reason enter Gensokyo and find themselves lost or unfulfilled. That's my understanding of it anyway which may turn out to be completely untrue. What I do know however is that she is a close personal friend of Yukari so her presence alongside Ran is not a coincidence. There is some significance to that object that you are holding onto, Flandre. It might be better for everyone if you just gave it up."

Flandre looked down at her cloudy carry bag that was flapping about wildly in her hand. It was missing its straps, a testament to all the hardships she had endured during the castle crisis. Inside it was the sunstone which was resting alongside her other comfort items. This high up, it felt like any worries she might have weren't even real. Those were things for mere mortals to concern themselves over who were bound to the earth. All she needed to do was reach into her bag and drop the sunstone and the noose would magically disappear from around her neck.

*But it would certainly make a grand memento of my journey. It wouldn't sit well with me if I just gave it up without a fight. But do I even care about it, really? It means nothing to me other than the fact that other beings seem to want it.*

"Hey," chimed in Cirno who seemed annoyed at having been shut out of the conversation thus far. "If you're going to give it up then I'll gladly take it off your hands! Here, hand it over!"

"No," Flandre stated flatly and held it close to her chest, away from the fairy's grasping fingers. Cirno grumbled and folded her arms in a strop. Cirno did a midair flip so that she was floating directly above Flandre. Close enough for the chill generated by her wings to make the vampire shudder. They locked eyes. Flandre thought it was like gazing into two miniature snow globes.

"Humph. If you don't want it anymore then why not give it to me?"

"Because," answered Flandre as she watched Cirno's hands suspiciously. "I never said that I didn't want it anymore, so stop trying to snatch it away from me!"

Cirno frowned and looked like she was about to say something else but before she could, Letty cleared her throat.

"Now, now girls," interrupted the winter Youaki as she tried to smooth things over with her usual smiling face. "Don't fight each other. Flandre, why not sell it or trade it in for a wonderful gift? If that field below us belongs to the wineford human village then we are not too far away from the forest of magic. Not too far within that forest lays a shop that stocks a variety of goods from both sides of the border. Does that sound appealing to you?"

"The forest of magic?" Flandre wondered aloud. The shop sounded interesting and she was keen to explore such an interestingly named place. In truth, Flandre was just wondering aimlessly in this foreign land and had no idea where she was going or what places of interest were worth visiting before she was forced to return to the mansion in



those sweet fleeting moments before daybreak. "Well I haven't decided to part ways with-"

"The forest of magic?" exclaimed Cirno. "That place is where Marisa the thief lives alongside that lonely doll-maker." Cirno was still flying over Flandre and grinned down at her. "Marisa was at the oni bar, wasn't she?" Cirno grinned. "I bet that means her house is unattended. Sometimes I lead the local fairies to take a little peak inside. Want to come along, Flan? It's good fun to rummage among someone else's belongings!"

"Well, that does sound like fun," remarked Flandre. "But can you not fly directly above me? You're making me nervous."

With that, Letty lead them towards their new destination but not without first insisting that they first visit Kourindou, which was apparently the name of the shop in question. There, Flandre should be able to find out the origin of the object and perhaps it's purpose as well as finding out if it's actually worth anything.

She still wasn't sure if she would part ways with it but supposed that it would depend largely on the offer she received. She wouldn't let herself be conned however and the shopkeeper best not assume that she was just a naive little girl.

While they travelled to the forest of magic which Letty was keen to assure her impatient companions that it wouldn't take very long to reach, they passed the time by talking and taking in the sights.

Flandre was particularly keen in experiencing the wonders of Gensokyo and made it a point to ask Letty questions about anything that seemed out of the ordinary. The field that had been below them for instance belonged to a nearby village of humans that grew crops which they used as offerings for more powerful Youkai to protect them or bless them with luck.

Flandre asked about why the stars were different colours and was told that the various regions of this magical realm each held their

own distinctive patterns or otherworldly identity. Since it was essentially an artificially created realm created by Yukari, every section of it had been formed and crafted with differing forms of magic which had been woven together to form Gensokyo.

The stars had been formed and since nothing can exist without consuming some form of fuel, had consumed some of the surrounding magic and in the process had absorbed some of the flavor or soul of the place.

*Once again, Yukari's name had appeared in relation to the inner workings of Gensokyo. Just how important was this so called gap demon? What is a gap demon anyway? Some being that curses gaps?*

They came across a sheer cliff face that seemed to be crawling with waving tentacles. The rock was a vibrant black and Flandre thought for a moment that it was some kind of giant monster until Letty informed her that the rock formation was instead infested with a carnivorous plant that had taken root within it's core. Flandre was thankful that she was safely within the air though she didn't doubt that she could destroy the whole formation if she so chose.

Cirno had happily proclaimed Letty a friend of the fairies that helped and protected them from bullies but also that she was sometimes annoyingly clingy and tried to keep them out of mischief. Letty chuckled at that and remarked that someone had to protect Cirno from her own dangerous curiosity. They had apparently known each other for quite some time as given their natures, they found each others company inviting and familiar.

Flandre herself had to avoid some probing questions of her own. She hadn't revealed her last name to anyone and planned to keep it that way. The fact that residents of the Scarlet Devil mansion routinely left the grounds and might catch wind of a certain Scarlet sister's deeds filled Flandre with dread.

Particularly because Cirno lived around the misty lake which was a stones throw away from her own home. Thankfully the very fact that she was a vampire hadn't alerted any suspicions. Whether that was because Remilia Scarlet just wasn't that famous outside the mansions walls, that vampires were more common than she thought or the possibility that the fairy was either too stupid to realize or just didn't care enough remained a mystery.

Flandre was the first one to notice the forest of magic as it appeared over the horizon. It was a forest like no other. Vast and foreboding, it seemed to be strangely alive. Every single hardwood seemed to pulse faintly with a constantly shifting colour, like an entire army of Christmas trees. Every single one had it's own unique identity.

It wasn't quite enough to illuminate the night but it was a beautiful sight as the rainbow colours were involved in an ever changing state of flux which created mesmerizing patterns. The like of which would have been impossible for even the most gifted of painter.

Letty decided that it would be far easier to travel inside the forest as opposed to simply flying over it as the eerie trees warped your sense of direction and without any landmarks you could easily find yourself lost, wondering aimlessly in the woodland. They landed near the outskirts. This close, Flandre could feel the weight hang heavy in the air. It was difficult to explain the sensation, but as a magical being herself, Flandre could feel that strong magics permeated every square inch of this forest.

It made the hairs on the back of her neck stand to attention and she closely watched the shadows for any lurking dangers but the luminous glare given off by the forest made it difficult to pinpoint things. Flandre felt a sense of unease at the unnatural scene before her. This wasn't how a normal and harmless forest was meant to look.

"Is this your first time?" breathed Cirno right into Flandre's ear. The vampire almost flinched in surprise as the cold chill swirled up inside

her ear but she quickly recovered and held herself in check. Flandre didn't want to give the fairy the satisfaction of watching her squirm.

"First time for what? And why are you standing so close to me all of a sudden?"

"The forest of magic, silly. You've never been here before, right Flandre?" Cirno took a step backwards with her usual confident swagger and giggled. "You sure don't know much despite being a vampire. Have you been sleeping in a coffin all this time or something? That's what you vampires do, right? That and eat smelly garlic."

Flandre blinked, feeling a little self-conscious at her lack of experience. "We don't actually sleep in coffins you know and I hate garlic," replied Flandre in a flustered voice. "I can show you the inside of a coffin if you like, fairy." She grinned back at her frosty fiend and slashed her talons across the air in a threatening gesture. "I'm feeling a little parched. Maybe some shaved ice, perhaps?"

Cirno chuckled lightheartedly and rubbed at her eyes. "Oh, Flandre. Stop trying to act so cool. You're not fooling anybody. I know you're secretly afraid of this forest. All those magical trees are going to come alive and eat you up!" Cirno made the exaggerated motions of a monster stealthily sneaking up on it's unsuspecting prey.

"I'm not afraid," Flandre protested. "And stop acting so dumb, though I realize that might be a challenge for you."

"Don't be so mean, Flanary. You don't have to hide your true feelings from me. We're friends, right? You can snuggle up to me tightly. I'll even hold your hand." The icy fairy demonstrated this by performing an impromptu impression of Flandre which mostly consisted of her cowering in fear while babbling incoherently.

A nice touch to detail was how Cirno reflected the light from the trees into her clear, icy wings in a crude imitation of Flandre's own colourful set. Still, the vampire didn't seem all that impressed.

"My name is Flandre, not Flan and not Flanary." She tutted and held up her hands in mock contempt. "It doesn't surprise me that you're jealous of my name with such a silly name like Cirno." She smirked in her best imitation of her sophisticated elder sister. "It sounds like the name someone would give a pet."

"No, you're jealous!" countered Cirno before she leapt onto Flandre's back who yelped at the sudden plunge in temperature.

"Get off of me, Fairy!" Flandre yelled as she squirmed and struggled to pull the irritation from her back before the frosty cold caused Cirno to fuse with Flandre's clothing. The bickering pair looked like a comedy duo as they grappled and ran around in a circle. Flandre almost shoved her off but Cirno was a tenacious fighter and grabbed onto Flandre's chest for purchase.

"Where do you think you're touching," yelled an increasingly flustered vampire as she frantically grasped behind her back. One hand found a mass of blue hair and pulled which only caused Cirno to yelp and tighten her own grip. This wrestling match seemed like it would continue forever as the two squabbling competitors each refused to relinquish this bizarre contest.

Letty held a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. To her, they looked like quarreling monkeys. Eventually she stepped in and smacked Cirno lightly on the head which ended this latest outburst of tomfoolery. Flandre laughed at that until Letty chastised her for acting childish despite her earlier claims that she shouldn't be treated like some common youngster while also reminding her that they were being pursued by at least two dangerous beings. Potentially more.

As they entered the forest, Flandre's pride was still stinging after that stern talking. It wasn't her fault that Cirno's mind was composed mostly of ice cream and that she was naturally jealous of her refined beauty and grace. She sighed and tried to ignore the uncomfortable feeling that was emanating from this magical place. It was like it had

an impossibly big and imposing presence of its own which eclipsed and enveloped every other existence within itself.

Flandre's much lauded senses were playing tricks on her by making her second guess every single feeling within her body and mind. At times the glowing trees with their strange, shimmering fruit seemed to the vampire that they were concealing an army behind those wooden faces. These feelings only lasted a second or more before disappearing like the wind.

Flandre noticed that her own wings were glowing much more fiercely than before as the latent power of the forest seeped into her very being. Her spirit felt enriched with power and she felt as if she could perform miracles with every bit of proficiency as her wise teacher, Patchouli Knowledge.

Cirno was walking hand in hand alongside Letty and it seemed like she didn't have a care in the world as she hummed and skipped along like she was travelling to a candy store. *How can she be so calm in this peculiar environment? And Letty for that matter. They have been here before so perhaps it's just a matter of experience.*

Cirno noticed Flandre staring and stuck her tongue out at her. Flandre frowned and exposed her fangs threateningly before chomping down on thin air.

"Make sure that we do not become separated," cautioned Letty as she lead the way. "Losing your way in this forest of magic and mystery is a very real possibility so make sure to keep a look out for any sign posts. Why, I've had to rescue Cirno and her friends on more than one occasion so I know the dangers very well."

"Don't tell her that!" Cirno hissed while tugging on Letty's frills. She was blushing with embarrassment which always looked out of place on her pale, white skin. Flandre gave Cirno a false smile without the faintest hint of humor and enjoyed the look of utter chagrin looking back at her. Teasing fairies was so much fun and Cirno had proven to be no exception to that rule.

The earth below Flandre's feet was alive with twisting vines and rough patches of pink and purple grass. She had to watch her step, lest she lose her footing. Eye catching flowers that practically demanded the attention of all those that passed them glistened with a sweet smelling sap that sparkled like fireworks.

A small insect landed on the enticing, shining petals and was immediately consumed in a small, green flame. Flandre decided to be extra careful in this deceptively memorizing forest.

It might look pretty and tranquil but she had learned to never drop her guard in an unfamiliar place. *Then again, if Cirno can survive here with such a carefree attitude, then do I really need to worry at all?*

"So, where is this so called Kourindou?" asked Flandre with a little air of impatience. The constantly pulsing colours were beautiful to look at but did leave you a little disorientated after prolonged exposure. It reminded Flandre of the book Alice in wonderland. Gensokyo was certainly an otherworldly place but this forest of magic was full to the brim with colourful greenery, magical energies and wondrous expectations. The area surrounding the Scarlet devil mansion looked positively normal in comparison.

"It shouldn't be far from here," Letty said without looking back.

"How can you be so sure?" asked Flandre. "We haven't encountered a single signpost since entering this forest."

"Ah, but we have." Letty smiled and pointed up at the trees. Flandre followed her finger but didn't see anything even remotely resembling a signpost hidden among the faintly glowing canopy. Just the same shifting colours which blotted out the sky and painted it into a silent storm of color.

"Do you see that violet coloured tree that never changes it's colour?"

Flandre nodded. It took her a little while to pinpoint the unique tree when it was surrounded by a constantly changing rainbow of shimmering mirages. Besides the slight change in tint, the tree seemed quite unremarkable.

"Yes, I can see it but there is no signpost next to it nor is there a carving upon it's surface."

"Those violet coloured trees have had their colours purposely changed in order to help guide visitors to the Kourindou. Without them, I doubt that it would get any business at all."

Flandre scoffed at that answer. "And why am I just hearing about this now? Wouldn't it have been more helpful to mention this little fact before we entered the forest?"

Letty looked a little perplexed at the vampire's lack of knowledge, like it was somehow a crime to not know an obscure thing about an unfamiliar place. "I'm sorry, Flandre. Given that your friends with Cirno, I'd just assumed that you were already aware of it." Letty patted Cirno softly on her head. "This little fairy is always getting herself into trouble and always drags along unsuspecting accomplices. Why, last time she broke into the doll-maker's house and was chased so deeply into the forest that-"

Cirno blushed and hurriedly shushed her before she could divulge anything further, clearly embarrassed at whatever self-inflicted misfortune had befallen her. Somehow, Flandre wasn't surprised.

After they found their first guiding tree, it didn't take them long to reach their elusive destination. Flandre didn't need to be told that one side of the tree was a deeper shade of violet than the other and that this signified which direction one should take. She just contented herself by drinking in the spectacle of the forest. It really was quite remarkable, both in appearance and in feeling.

A pebble stone path was Flandre's first clue that they had reached some form of civilization. They followed this trail which weaved



through the vivid display of colours until they came upon the shop itself.

The path ended with two, huge stones that flanked it on either side. They were adorned with various charms and long, tough looking white rope which looked suspiciously like snakes hugging up tightly against the cold gray rock. Kourindou itself was mostly hidden from view as only the entrance was clear from vegetation and the ever present, soft glowing of the forest.

The signpost above the door welcomed all those that wished to enter in various languages, most of which Flandre couldn't understand or even place. Some were written in words and others in symbols that hurt the eyes the longer you tried to work out their intricate meaning. As she walked up to the varnished, wooden door she noticed a small message that read "All shoplifters will be prosecuted."

She glanced at Cirno almost subconsciously and then chided herself for doing so. It wasn't like she was totally innocent herself.

Flandre took one final, deep breath of the magically rich air before she pushed open the large, double doors and entered the Kourindou shop. Inside, her attention was immediately drawn to two massive sets of shelves that seemed to stretch off into nothingness.

They rested either side of her and were full to the brim with various objects of all shapes and sizes. Not only were they impossibly long but they extended all the way to the shop's high ceiling. With no staircase in sight, the only way to scale these imposing looking shelves was to fly upwards. The area between them also very spacious and completely devoid of anything which gave the illusion that the shelves were even bigger and more imposing than they actually were.

Flandre sniffed pungent incense on the air and wrinkled her nose. It smelled like a mixture of flowers and gave off a pleasant fragrance that reminded the vampire of a garden in the midst of summer

bloom. The shop was well lit and seemed warm and inviting despite the colossal scale.

"Hello and welcome to my humble shop," came a soft spoken male voice from Flandre's left. "What can I interest you with today?"

Apparently Flandre had been too taken in with the impressive sights to notice the small desk that was tucked into an alcove just inside the entrance. A tall, silver haired man sat behind the well crafted looking desk and greeted his new potential customers with a curt nod to each of them. His wire rimmed glasses hid a pair of golden eyes that seemed wise and knowledgeable. He looked to be wearing a cotton robe that was blue on the right side and black on the left. The straps on either side were reversed in colour and a small brown pouch was hung over his chest.

When his gaze fell upon Cirno, his welcoming smile faltered a little. His perfectly amiable expression shattering like a broken mirror. "And what may I ask are you doing here, Cirno?"

The icy fairy had been huddled against Letty's padded dress in an attempt to remain unnoticed and peered out from her hiding place like a cornered animal. Cirno looked like she had just been scolded and looked sheepishly up at the shopkeeper. "I just want to look around," she said.

"Rinnosuke," said Letty. "Don't worry about little Cirno. I promise that she will be on her best behavior. We actually have something that we'd like you to turn your practiced eye upon, if you would be so kind."

"Oh, really?" replied Rinnosuke, his interest suddenly pinged. "Well, I'll certainly have a look at it." He readjusted his glasses and closed a large, dusty book before pushing it aside to make room on his cluttered desk. A stack of pens toppled over but he ignored it in the face of something potentially rare and valuable to examine. Letty smiled down at Flandre and beckoned her forwards.

Flandre walked up to the desk. It was quite tall and came up just below her shoulders. She felt a little short as she pulled out the sunstone and placed it carefully in Rinnosuke's hands. His touch was smooth and flowed with a certain ease as he placed his fingers. She saw the flash of surprise in his eyes as he took his first look upon the much sought after object.

"Ah," he mumbled knowingly as his fingers traced across it with as much care and precision as if he were playing a musical instrument or holding a priceless family heirloom. "Tell me, what do you know about this item. How did you acquire it?"

"I know it's called the sunstone and that's pretty much it," said Flandre. "I found it during the aftermath of a battle so I assume it's pretty valuable." She was determined that she wouldn't be conned out of any potential reward so was keen to stress the item's importance.

"Ah, yes. It is indeed known as the sunstone," said Rinnosuke who wouldn't even tear his eyes away from the object long enough to look down at Flandre. She found that incredibly bad mannered and grumbled under her breath but listened patiently all the same.

"These grooves along the underside actually fit into another artifact known as the moonstone. I don't suppose you happened to have another one of these, young lady?" Flandre shook her head and was about to speak but the shopkeeper just continued on regardless. He had a soft and unassuming voice but his confidence and expertise made you pay attention to his every word.

"Oh, what a shame. This item would be much more exquisite and valuable if it were complete. This particular piece acts much like a navigation mechanism. The carvings etched on the top side act as a guide in order to help the user calibrate it. It can be twisted and turned when powered however that faint electric like pulse that you can probably feel while holding it indicates that it needs to be placed inside the moonstone before it can be manipulated. It's called the sunstone as a reference to old fashioned sundials that humans used

to help guide them throughout the day. Similarly, this item guides the use of the completed mechanism."

"That's real interesting but will you give us anything for it?" Cirno asked. Letty and Flandre both frowned. Rinnosuke cleared his throat and continued.

"There are four pieces in all. The moonstone, for instance, actually contains a small piece of the moon that was taken from around the foundation of the lunar capital, which the lunarians are not particularly happy about. This puzzle is remarkable but is relatively new, despite looking like some ancient artifact. It really is quite-" and then he stopped himself mid-sentence and thought for a moment. Time stretched on and the silence was starting to grow uncomfortable. His brow furrowed up into lines. Flandre noticed that his breathing and heart-rate had increased ever so slightly. Just enough to tell her that something was amiss.

"Would you let me hold onto this for a more detailed examination, young lady?" he asked Flandre from behind his desk. He bent down a little and half smiled in an attempt to appear friendly but Flandre was still skeptical. "You may look around my store in the mean time, if you so wish. There are a lot of objects that cannot be found anywhere else in Gensokyo. Please, browse my wares and please let me know if anything catches your attention."

Flandre was still pretty sure that he was holding something back from his otherwise thoroughly detailed appraisal. He stuck her as the type of person that loved to ramble on about the wonders and history of antiques so she was doubly sure that he was withholding some little tidbit of information. Whether that was because he wanted to take advantage of her by offering less than it was worth or something else, she couldn't say. She didn't think it was the former as shopkeepers built themselves on reputation, so that meant? What, exactly?

Flandre decided to hang onto the sunstone for now, ostensibly so that she could look around and see if anything caught her eye. Well,

that was partly true but the real reason was because she had a feeling that hanging into it was the best course of action. She wasn't one to trust easily. Her pride was still a little beaten from being used by the backstabbing Claudette.

The only reason she had trusted Cirno in the beginning is because she was a fairy and that she had proven herself in a duel. That demanded a certain amount of respect. She and Letty obviously cared about each other a great deal, and that's why she had accepted the winter Youkai into her life.

She still wanted to learn more about Rinnosuke and his shop, plus sneaking around forbidden places was something like a hobby to her so while the others happily hovered up to gaze at the vast array of items and trinkets, Flandre followed the shopkeeper into the backroom which was located just behind his desk.

This turned out to be a storehouse and workshop. Shelves lined the walls but were much less grandiose and more practical than the ones located in the shop proper. Tools and materials hung from the ceiling. A well worn wooden worktable dominated the center of the large room and was fresh with recent cuts and scrapes. If Flandre didn't know any better, she would have thought this was a torture room like the one back at the mansion.

She heard Rinnosuke's soft spoken voice and silently ducked behind a metal shelving unit that contained an assortment of bottles and plastic flagons that gave off a curious scent. Many of which were adorned with harsh looking skull and crossbone icons or depictions of featureless white humans doing foolish things. She ignored the intoxicating fumes and listened intently while peering out from behind a firmly sealed metal barrel. His back was facing towards Flandre which made things easier.

"Yes, I understand that," he said into a strange, sleek looking device that he was holding up against the side of his head. Flandre was familiar with the concept of telephones but only the extremely old

fashioned Victorian models. Maybe they were commonplace in Gensokyo?

"I picked up the phone as soon as I was able too. Please, don't tease me like that."

It irritated Flandre that she was only able to hear one side of the conversation but nothing was ever perfect.

"Yes, it isn't going anywhere for the time being. They are currently looking around my shop and show no signs of leaving. That may change though, so I would best hurry."

Flandre's blood was suddenly boiling hot. How dare this stranger betray her presence to someone else. She bit down on her lip, carefully, as she was a vampire after all and repeated a soothing mantra inside her head which just about stopped her from springing out from her hiding place and snatching the device right out of his hand.

"Believe me, the humor in using a phone in Gensokyo is not lost on me however this is the only way you left me to contact you. Probably because you find it amusing that a dealer in human goods uses a human contraption to speak, isn't that right Yukari?"

That name gave Flandre some pause. She had no first hand experience of the person or being but Letty seemed cautious enough whenever the name was brought up. Rinnosuke chuckled and seemed more relieved all of a sudden.

"Oh, that's convenient. So Ran is already close by on related business? That's good news indeed. At least your Shikigami will handle this matter appropriately. I would rather my shop didn't turn into a battleground, again. Yes, I suppose so. I trust my customers will not be harmed?"

The shopkeeper ruffled his silver hair restlessly as he listened to the response. Whatever was said had clearly troubled him judging by the

change in his body language. He pressed down on a button and sighed while looking up at the ceiling.

"If only they resist, huh?"

# Butterflies

"Cirno!" Flandre called out as she scanned the monolithic shelves for a fleeting sign of the icy fairy's sparkling wings. Her voice echoed back at her within the vast chamber. The two large shelves that she had seen upon entering the Kourindou had only been the tip of the iceberg. The reality had been that this shop had a network of crisscrossing shelves and hallways that reminded Flandre of Patchouli's vast library of books and it was just as difficult to locate a single something in such a maze of sensory overload.

"Cirno! Letty! Where are you?" she tried again but not a single soul answered her back. Flandre cursed under her breath and resumed her search by hovering over to the nearest intersection while listening intently for any signs of movement.

Some of the shelves contained items who's only purpose seemed to be to infuriate her even further. A clicking clock with a glass top that exposed all the inner workings of the mechanism blissfully continued it's work at hampering the vampire's efforts to locate her fairy friend.

Flandre's hand twitched with the urge to destroy the mocking clock but she hesitated as Remilia's disapproving face appeared in her mind's eye.

*I'm sorry sister but I don't really feel like following the rules right about now.*

With a flicker of her hand, the clock shattered into multiple, flaming pieces. The glass top instantly crystallized before turning into hot, molten slag. It bubbled and pored over the clock's smoking carcass like a volcano until the whole fiery mess burned right through the shelve to share it's destruction to those below it.

Flandre sighed and took a deep breath. That made her feel a little better, but only a little. It was like scratching an irritating itch that had



been bothering you for quite some time. When she had heard Rinnosuke betray her like that, she had considered simply rushing out from her hiding place and grabbing him by the throat until something soothed her boiling anger. No, Flandre corrected herself.

*I wasn't betrayed. We were never friends to begin with. I should always keep that in mind when dealing with beings outside the mansion.*

Of course, that simple fact made protecting her existing friendships that much more important. Releasing her pent up frustrations would have wasted valuable time. She had no idea how close Ran and Yuyuko were and the thought of Cirno and Letty running into them without her presence was enough of a motivator for Flandre to seek them out first rather than toy with the shopkeeper. If they were going to face danger, than she wanted to be there on center stage as the staring attraction.

*Well, making sure they'll be save and sound is just a bonus, I guess. Right, Flandre?*

The vampire didn't like the knot that formed within her stomach with every passing moment that her searching remained fruitless. It was an unsettling feeling to be relied upon to protect others. When something you held dear was in potential danger, even if that particular something was totally oblivious to it and many other things at that. Still, having something worth protecting was better than having nothing at all.

Her searching hadn't really progressed all that far when she heard the tell tell creaking of the main double doors opening. Flandre froze in midair and instinctively moved towards a patch of shadows to limit her visibility. She hovered near a collection of dolls that stared at her with lifeless eyes. She ignored them the best that she could manage and pushed herself between the well crafted imitations.

They mostly resembled human children though there were a few more exotic variations among them. The fact that their Gothic looking

clothing and youthful appearance made them look extremely similar to Flandre herself irked the vampire. Instead of others calling her a child, it looked like she was admitting it by fitting in so well with this creche of fake beings. She frowned but waited patiently all the same.

It didn't take long for voices to reach her. The echoes rapidly turned into distant whispers of the real thing. It was eerily silent besides that with only the smoldering remains of the clock providing any break whatsoever in the total absence of sound. Hardly the bustling atmosphere that Flandre expected from such a well stocked shop. She was on one of the middle range shelves and so had a good view as Yuyuko and Rinnosuke appeared out of the gloom.

They didn't seem to be moving with purpose at all and were casually hovering along while exchanging a few words of conversation. The shopkeeper looked tense but given his company, Flandre could well understand. The so called princess of the dead may speak whimsically but Flandre had seen enough to be wary of her character.

There was no sigh of Ran however and having an unseen threat lurking in the wings was much more menacing than simply facing them head on. Those ominous white butterflies still persisted around Yuyuko as well as that unsettling feeling that bubbled within Flandre's stomach whenever she laid eyes upon that distinctive blue robe and misleadingly cheerful smile.

"You have some red on you, lady Yuyuko," said the shopkeeper as he pointed towards her ample chest. Speckles of red stained her otherwise immaculate clothing.

"Oh, this?" she answered innocently. "It's just a little red wine left over from dinner. I can be such a klutz sometimes."

She chuckled lightly but her disarming performance didn't seem to help matters at all. Rather they simply seemed to fan the flames of suspicion.

"Don't worry your little head over it, Rinnosuke." She clapped her hands together. "Now, are our friends still within the vicinity?"

Rinnosuke nodded and readjusted his collar as if the temperature had suddenly increased by several magnitudes. "They haven't exited the building via the front entrance. They should still be inside."

"Good, good. I would really dislike it if I was forced to meander about any further. Ah, this is such a hassle. Did Yukari say anything to you, Rinnosuke? I swear, she must be giggling behind the scenes at saddling me with such a boring task." Yuyuko let out a forlorn sigh and slowed her flying a little. She glanced at the silver haired man while trying to play the part of the tragic victim. He scratched his head and averted his eyes from her penetrating gaze.

"Nothing," he said flatly. "Though it wouldn't surprise me if she derived some kind of amusement from this situation. She knows how much I dislike it whenever she sends-" He mumbled to himself and trailed off as if just realizing his present company. He looked up and down the shelves as he tried to remove himself from this obviously uncomfortable situation. "Well, it shouldn't matter in any case. This whole affair should be over with soon enough."

Flandre watched and listened as they hovered along from her vantage point up above in the higher reaches of the large shelving units. It was like hiding up in the rafters while a church conducted it's morning service. You could watch in safety while listening in to everyone's private conversations. Flandre had to resist shuffling uncomfortably as the dolls rubbed up against her bare skin but she was practiced enough not to move a single muscle.

"Please, continue," said Yuyuko. "You were about to say something else, weren't you?"

"Oh, don't worry about it. It was nothing important."

Yuyuko didn't look convinced and a wryly smile cross her lips that suggested that she was privy to some private joke. She came to a

dead stop and hovered in midair as the glowing white spirits jostled around her restlessly as if they were competing for her favor. Rinnosuke likewise stopped when he realized that he was suddenly floating alone. He looked back nervously while waiting with baited breath.

"Is something the matter, lady Yuyuko?"

Flandre's eyes widened as she saw what the Princess of the dead found so amusing. She was staring almost directly at Flandre's hiding place, hidden as she was in among the dolls. She froze as she felt cold, invisible hands caress her soul as Yuyuko peered into the darkness that the vampire had cloaked herself in.

*I know that she cannot see me with her naked eyes and I've masked my presence to the best of my abilities. I haven't moved nor made a single sound. I've held my breath, so what gave me away? Or did she just look up here to admire the dolls? Just a coincidence?*

"I didn't know you stocked living dolls, Rinnosuke. I didn't think you were so amoral," remarked Yuyuko as her pink and penetrating eyes danced across the collection of silent, motionless limbs. Flandre felt a severe sense of dread as she crouched silently between the lifeless imitations.

She felt like closing her all seeing red eyes as she felt that even the faintest gleam could have given her away. There was an old saying that if you didn't look at the person you were hiding from then they wouldn't be able to see you in return. Flandre didn't feel like testing out that particular theory.

Suddenly the air between the shelves grew deathly cold. Not the kind of chilly cold that affected someones skin, but a more penetrating, frigid feeling that reached into your spiritual self and tore away at your most precious possession.

The dark space around Flandre was suddenly bathed in an intensely bright white glow as a shimmering white butterfly phased through the

solid looking black shelf like it wasn't even there. Flandre gasped as the close proximity to such a deceptively beautiful form sucked the life from her like a ravenous beast.

It was only for the briefest of seconds, but in that moment, Flandre felt something touch and reach inside her with uncaring fingers and attempt to yank her spirit right out of her body. She felt violated and immediately couldn't stand to be near the graceful butterfly like she had developed some kind of uncontrollable fear towards it. Like it was a nightmare manifested into reality.

Flandre shoved aside the dolls and sprung out dramatically from her hiding place like a coiled spring. Several of the fakes were torn into pieces and fragments of cloth and missing limbs rained down as she made her decent.

Flandre held out a hand as she hit the floor with a bang to brace herself from the irresistible force. The flooring cracked as if rocked by an earthquake and dust was kicked up into the air as the wooden floorboards discharged their accumulated particles.

Flandre held herself ready in a crouch and eyed her two potential adversaries with a threatening glare. Rinnosuke looked taken aback by the vampire's explosive appearance but Yuyuko seemed bemused and chuckled while holding a hand over her mouth like the refined lady she claimed to be.

"What have you done to my precious mechanize?" exclaimed Rinnosuke as he keeled over the fallen remains of the dolls. He picked up a loose arm that was missing two fingers and cradled it like had belonged to a living child. Flandre found that she couldn't spare him much sympathy considering his recent past actions.

"Look what you've done to Margret! And Annabel! Those pieces were genuine, handcrafted Victorian era dolls!" He groaned full of anguish and attempted to collect the less damaged members of his collection as they looked back at him with their lifeless eyes.

"Oh, you have some nice reflexes on you, young lady," Yuyuko said, congratulating Flandre on her survival. "Just a little longer and you would have become just another restless spirit. I would have surely welcomed you when you eventually wandered into Hakugyokurou."

Flandre cautiously rose to her feet while keeping a keen lookout for any sign of the princess' ferocious Kitsune companion. The tension in the air was palatable and could have been cut with a knife however Flandre was also somewhat relieved that everything was finally out in the open. No more hiding, nor sticking to the shadows. When choice was removed, all you could do was push forwards.

Flandre nodded her appreciation at the compliment. "So, how did you find me? I was confident that I had masked my presence completely."

Yuyuko nodded. "Yes, yes, you did however I can see the light of your soul. It burns so very brightly that I was drawn to it like a moth to a candle. Such a ferocious flame couldn't help but catch my attention. It looks very energetic and is positively bursting with colour. You're a vampire, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"You have a weak but exotic mixture of vitality swirling within your soul, most likely from the different blends of blood that you have taken in. You cannot see it, but as the gatekeeper to the other side, I alone can witness such splendor." Yuyuko ran a hand slowly across one cheek as a wistful sigh escaped her lips. "Ah, I wonder what such a fiery spirit would feel like?"

*What's wrong with this woman? Is she unbalanced or something?*

Flandre anxiously crossed her arms around her chest protectively to block Yuyuko's wandering pink gaze. It looked like the so called princess was sizing her up for any tasty choice pieces the way a butcher might assess a prime piece of meat. The younger Scarlet

sister had no intention of playing along with whatever twisted fantasy was floating around in the possibly crazy Youkai's mind.

"My spirit would feel just as fierce as my power!" Flandre stated balefully. "Why don't you stop chasing me while you're still able to, Yuyuko?"

Yuyuko found that threat quite amusing and giggled gleefully, like it was the funniest thing she had ever heard but her smile was false, that much Flandre was certain of.

"Is that so?" she said, more of a statement than a question. She cocked her head and regarded the vampire in a new light.

"You know my name but I do not yet know yours? How rude. When most people hear my name, they are rightfully more respectful than that. Please add 'lady' to my name when referring to me in future, please, otherwise I cannot be held accountable for my actions." She held out her hands open palmed, like she was already washing her hands of the consequences.

Flandre displayed a fang filled smirk and performed a mock curtsy. "As you say, Yuyuko."

For the first time since meeting her, the smile faded from Yuyuko's usually whimsical demeanor. Rinnosuke immediately forgot his inspection and intervened when he saw the stormy course events were taking. He placed himself between the potentially explosive situation and held up a stern looking hand with an air of confidence that was born from his intense desire to prevent any further damage to his beloved shop.

"Young lady," he addressed Flandre. "Please, hand over the sunstone to me and I promise that I'll arrange save passage for you and your friends. Nothing unpleasant needs to happen here tonight. You are meddling with things that would best be forgotten about. Please understand."

Flandre narrows her eyes at this insolence. She wouldn't have minded so much if he hadn't been the cause of this confrontation. "If you didn't want any trouble than you shouldn't have told those beings of my whereabouts."

She indicated Yuyuko with a curt nod and enjoyed the look of surprise that briefly flashed across Rinnosuke's face. "Whatever happens, happens. I will not give this up for free. It's mine until I decide otherwise."

"I don't think she intends to corporate," Yuyuko said as she let out a sad breath. Rinnosuke glanced nervously over his shoulder. Flandre saw Yuyuko's face in the reflection cast by his glasses. Her expression didn't match her words at all. In fact, she look quite pleased at the direction events were taking.

*Well, that's fine. I'll use you to vent my frustrations.*

"I didn't intend for anyone to be harmed," exclaimed Rinnosuke. "I've had a lot of business with Yukari Yukumo so you can trust my words when I say that she assured me that if you hand over the sunstone without incident then nothing unsavory will happen to anyone. Both Reimu Hakurei and Yukari Yakumo are seeking out these stones. This is a serious incident and nothing but misfortune and danger will befall you. Please, give it up and we can be done with this."

The silver haired shopkeeper looked flustered and his words seemed sincere. Flandre was pretty good at reading body language and facial expressions. This was particularly true when the subject was displaying such unrestrained emotion. Perhaps she had misjudged him initially.

It looked like Rinnosuke was about to say more but before he was able to, several sharp crackles of shattering material reverberated around the shelves. This was followed by several muffled shouts and the billowing of onrushing winds. Several expensive china teapots and plates shook on their wire frame holdings.



"Looks like Ran found your little friends," teased Yuyuko as she looked directly at Flandre and waited patiently for the news to provoke a reaction or some drop in the vampire's guard. Flandre almost turned around to intervene but she stopped herself with sheer force of will.

Rinnosuke gasped and immediately started to spirit in the direction of the loud, echoing sounds. He moved quite fast for someone traveling on foot and was probably horrified at the prospect of any more damage to his expensive and rare merchandise. He turned the corner at the nearest intersection and disappeared from sight.

"Ah, alone at last," said Yuyuko. The white spirits bobbed around her restlessly. "Will you not hurry to your friends aid, little vampire?"

"Not until I have dealt with you," retorted Flandre. He own aura shimmered and surrounded her outline with faint, red waves of power.

Yuyuko chuckled at that and hugged herself closely as she was overcome with obsession. "Ah, such misplaced confidence."

Flandre was somewhat disturbed by this creepy change in character and suddenly felt a pair of deathly cold hands reach into her spiritual shadow and attempt to yank it from her body. It took her a split second to realize that this wasn't just a mental feeling and looked down in alarm to see the beginnings of a white butterfly poke itself through the dark wooden flooring. It hadn't touched her physical body yet but it's close proximity sent shivers up her spine.

Flandre gasped at this distressing violation of her soul. She dropped her bag that she had up until now had been clutching tightly within her hand and launched herself into the air before her true self was ripped from her very being. Her wings glowed with energy as they propelled their master away from harm. The white shimmering butterflies and spirits fluttered around Yuyuko's head as she followed the vampire's assent with something approaching awe.

"Ah, so pretty," she moaned as she spun around gracefully like a dancer and crafted all the ghostly energy around her into a massive pair of ethereal scissors which were almost as large as the shelves themselves.

They hummed faintly with the souls trapped within. Flandre spun around and saw as Yuyuko snapped the pale double blades shut and made sure that she wasn't within it's deathly path. The air around the blades was the same cold, almost depressing sensation as the butterflies and Flandre put as much distance between it and her as possible.

Yuyuko was laughing manically as she swung and snapped at Flandre. The twin blades clashed together but the vampire was just one step ahead and was steadily closing the distance between them as she ducked and weaved herself into a better position.

Yuyuko wielded the giant scissors with ease which told Flandre that they must have very little weight or substance. This was backed up by the fact that it was able to pass through objects like a spirit which was exactly what it was made up of.

"Stop moving," Yuyuko giggled as the large shimmering scissors devoured the space that Flandre had been occupying just a moment before in a lighting snap. Tired of being on the defensive Flandre snarled and fired back a series of rapid fire bolts of red, burning fire in the shape of a lance that hurtled towards her foe in the blink of an eye. Yuyuko cheerfully smiled as spirits formed instantly and moved themselves in the line of fire to shield their master.

The scarlet lances obliterated the drifting spirits and blossomed into impressive looking explosions of fiery light that hung in the air. Yuyuko looked bewildered as her vision was almost entirely engulfed.

She blindly swung the scissors in the most obvious path of attack but Flandre, who's own senses were as sharp as ever and completely unhindered, avoided the aimless blades and knocked the scissors

out of Yuyuko's hands with a concussive burst of air pressure as she contained a miniature detonation within her palms.

Yuyuko stumbled backwards awkwardly and clutched her hands tightly together as the stinging sensation made her wince with pain.

"What an unfamiliar sensation," she moaned.

Flandre emerged out of the burning cloud like a vengeful phoenix. Within her hands was a raging orange and yellow sun that was alive with its own solar flares and burning corona. The fanning flames illuminated Flandre's excited expression of joy at the thrill of battle. Nothing was more intoxicating to her than cutting loose against both a strong opponent and one that she didn't have to hold herself back against.

"Take this!" she screamed and thrust the flaming sphere right at her opponent. The intense shining light reflected the vivid colours in Flandre's wings and painted an expressive picture of dazzling beauty for Yuyuko who enjoyed the pleasing sight as she simply went limp and let herself fall backwards.

Flandre thought she was crazy as she saw the smiling Yuyuko leave herself open like that. The sheering heat of the fireball passed harmlessly over Yuyuko however all Flandre had to do was readjust her hands downwards to immolate the princess into ashes.

However Yuyuko had fallen onto a relaxing cushion comprised of floating spirits and still retained full use of her body. She looked up at Flandre calmly despite the imminent prospect of death looming on the horizon.

"You're so passionate, vampire," she said as a storm of white butterflies flew up from Yuyuko's outstretched hands. From Flandre's close perspective, it looked like a white firecracker going off right next to her face. Many of the butterflies flung themselves suicidally into Flandre's sun which caused it to bulge and become dangerously

unstable. It rumbled and began to rock wildly in Flandre's hand as it swelled to almost double its size.

*Dammit, this is bad!*

Flandre abandoned the failing star as both combatants flew backwards as the brightness lit up the store to a blinding yellow glow. Flandre yelped as the surface of her skin heated up to uncomfortable levels and her blonde hair was blown around fiercely right in her face.

She closed her eyes just in time to avoid serious retinal damage as the sun went supernova and exploded into a shining rainbow storm that knocked her back even further with its powerful shock wave.

The smoke produced a thick cloud full of sparkling particles of solar energy that turned the space into a mesmerizing celestial cluster. Flandre coughed and angrily swiped a hand that caused a billowing wind that cleared the dust around her. She could identify Yuyuko's location from her accompanying pale spirits that acted almost like a lighthouse on a stormy night.

"Wow, that was an explosive trick," said Yuyuko who made no attempt to keep herself hidden within the shroud. "Why are you so energetic I wonder?"

She giggled and weaved her hands in a precise series of movements. Some of her fingers actually became transparent or disappeared entirely. Yuyuko kept her eyes on Flandre as she worked and looked forward eagerly to her reaction. The form she was creating rapidly began to take shape until the swirling energies formed themselves into a spectral apparition. Flandre didn't bat an eyelid as she recognized the black clothing and sinister features.

*Claudette.*

"Well?" Yuyuko asked with a sinister smile of her own. "It's your screaming friend from the tunnel. This is why you hate me so, is it

not?"

Yuyuko walked up to Claudette or at least her spiritual form and gave the former thief a sympathetic look. She tutted and looked back at Flandre. "Isn't it a shame that you couldn't save her?"

Flandre frowned. Claudette stared at her blankly as her form shifted in the dust cloud. "She wasn't my friend, fool. And I don't hate you. I'm happy that my annoyances are taking such good care of each other."

She could still hear the distant sounds of battle coming from a few shelves over and desperately wanted to end this duel and check on her companions. The crackling of ice impacting against something made the hairs on the back of her neck stand to attention as well as the swooshing sounds that she couldn't quite place.

*Cirno should be alright, that little troublemaker is tougher than she appears and Letty is with her, for whatever that is worth.*

"Tch!" Yuyuko spat and dispelled the mockery with a bad tempered wave of the hand. "How rude of you! We'll see who's the fool here."

The space around her began to glow with sparkling lights. Yuyuko's blue robes billowed as invisible forces caressed her resolute form. Several more ethereal beings began to take shape, their shimmering white outlines popping up from beneath the wooden flooring. Flandre fell into an offensive stance since she had no intention of patiently waiting for Yuyuko to prepare whatever misdeeds she had in mind.

She snarled as her hands spat powerful spears of concentrated death at her opponent. The swarm of white butterflies that was swarming around Yuyuko intercepted every single shot by placing themselves in the path of fire.

They each exploded in a bright bang of otherworldly light. Summoning circles were appearing on the ground now. Their

glowing intricate scriptures reached into the afterlife to pull wayward souls to serve the princess of the dead's will.

Flandre felt that now familiar unsettling sensation of having your soul ripped from your body and instantly launched herself into the air once again as pale flapping butterflies phased through the wooden floorboards.

"That trick will not work again, Yuyuko," Flandre called as the rapidly building tension caused her excitement to build up and up. A smile formed on her lips as she was determined not to let Yuyuko to have all the fun.

She fired a series of rapid shots again, her hands glowing red with barely restrained power. Usually she would hold herself back due to the strict treatment by Remilia however when she lost control of herself like this, her strength fluctuated wildly.

The bolts of supreme energy were once again intercepted by the butterflies with loud clashes of opposing forces however this time a few of them simply impaled the spiritual insects and continued on their dangerous path.

Yuyuko wasn't concerned as an invisible shield of pink luminescence pulsed brightly as the first lance slammed into it. The ground shook with the impact and several items rained down from the high reaches of the shelves.

Yuyuko's confident smile evaporated when the next bolt shattered the shield with an ear splitting crack of lightening. A series of gleaming fissures crisscrossed across it's surface before it shattered completely and blinked out of existence.

The bolt would have pierced her heart but instead it was deflected into her shoulder instead. A saving grace from her destroyed shield. Yuyuko yelped as she was thrown back into the shelf like a danmaku projectile. A shower of broken wood and falling books followed.

Flandre allowed herself a mean spirited chuckle as she floated high in the air.

"How did you like that?" she mumbled.

She wasn't sure how much damaged she'd done but took no small amount of satisfaction in the fact that it must have hurt a lot. With alarm, Flandre returned her attention to Yuyuko's parting gift. The summoning circles had finished their immoral work and had brought many more spirits into the world in the same manner as Claudette. Most of them were humans with distant, sorrowful expressions but all of them had their eyes trained on Flandre.

The nearest one, a bald human man in a state of undress dived at Flandre from above. His hands were empty but the vampire was far too wary to let his pale, cold fingers touch her beautiful skin. She avoided him with ease and heard his disappointed wails as he went past her. More spirits launched themselves at Flandre. They were all around her and all of them had the same sorrowful cry as the first.

She avoided the clawing hands of a long dead tengu Youkai and smacked away a disheveled looking human nun with a flaming swipe of her hand. A knight in rusting armour brought down his blade to Flandre's back but she yawned and effortlessly pushed herself to the side with a mere thought. Spirits they may be but that didn't make them especially powerful when faced with a long lived vampire.

*This is boring.*

Flandre was about to leave when she heard the laughing voice of Yuyuko echoing around the walls and shelves. She spun around just in time to see her persistent enemy rise from the ashes of the ruined pile her spectacular impact had created. Books, scrolls and various objects all burned with a pale flame as Yuyuko steadily glided into the air. All the while Flandre was assaulted by the legions of the afterlife.

"Ah," Yuyuko moaned as she rubbed at her sore shoulder. The blue fabric had been scorched away and the flesh beneath was inflamed an angry looking shade of red.

Far from angry, her face was beaming with obsession. "Such unrestrained power," she yelled at Flandre with relish. "I'm glad I took on this boring assignment because I was able to meet you. I thank you for a wonderful time but I cannot allow you to live after such disrespect. I'll look forward to meeting you in the afterlife, vampire!"

With her declaration finished, Yuyuko lifted her hands above her head and began to chant dark, forceful words whose every syllable dripped with vengeful intent. A whirling black and white vortex ripped itself into reality, its coming accompanied by a hundred wails of distress as the spirits reacted to its presence.

The shop began to vibrate as the storm of souls doubled in size in an instant. Yuyuko was laughing manically as she looked up at her destructive creation. It now resembled a giant, swirling windstorm of crackling energy.

"Oh my!" she shouted to be heard over the screaming currents of the storm. Her flowery hat was sucked into the void which exposed her pink, flowing hair and showed off her eyes more clearly. They sparkled with a form of controlled insanity.

"I hope I'm not overdoing things! This shouldn't cause too much damage to the shop but it will certainly rip your soul from that scrawny little body of yours!"

The temperature in the room immediately flatlined as all the warmth in the air was almost instantly devoured by the ravenous tempest. Many of the spirits were dragged into the event horizon but those closest to Flandre still attacked her with whatever they had to hand.

It made everything insanely more difficult to manage as her wings fought for purchase. They glowed brighter than a star as Flandre



strained to keep herself rooted among the raging currents. It felt like fighting yourself upstream with one hand tied behind your back.

Countless objects were sucked from the shelves which provided even more obstacles for Flandre to evade. It felt like evading danmaku, only more messy and chaotic. All the while Yuyuko was laughing as if she was totally oblivious to the giant, crackling storm just above her head. Something nagged at the back of the vampire's mind but it was difficult to focus when she was evading wailing ghosts and flying vases.

*Oh that's right! My bag!*

Flandre ducked and flew downwards to escape the worst packs of spirits and frantically scanned the cluttered air. There was so many things flying through the air that picking out a single, small object was a seemingly impossible task. With no other option, Flandre yelled out a blood chilling cry of pure frustration and flung herself directly at Yuyuko.

*The sooner I end this, the more chance I have.*

"Oh," laughed Yuyuko as she chuckled at the vampire's choice of action. "Are you suicidal? Very well then, if you think you can weather the storm then go right ahead!"

Her taunt sounded strange and distorted this close to the epicenter. Flandre noticed that Yuyuko's hands were shaking slightly as she struggled to control the immense forces at work. The wind was billowing in Flandre's face and it only grew stronger the closer she approached. Not only that but she was growing weaker by the second. Yuyuko hadn't been lying when she had said that this death spiral would rip the soul from her near immortal body.

Those chilly, invisible tendrils wrapped themselves around her heart and started pulling. Flandre yelled as she fought her own inner battle that mirrored the struggles she was facing in the material realm. She arched her speeding assent slightly lower to avoid a falling clarinet

and then higher to escape the clutching fingers of a moaning spirit who was spinning out of control. It took every ounce of power and concentration she possessed to keep herself steady while maintaining a mental shield to hang onto her spiritual being.

Yuyuko finally started to show some concern as it became apparent that the hurtling vampire was actually defeating the almost irresistible forces that she was throwing at her. This close, Flandre's yelling voice was loud enough to drown out the wailing, rampaging winds. It was all Yuyuko heard and she panicked by dropping her hands involuntarily to defend herself, even if it meant losing control of the maddening forces she herself had unleashed.

"Too late!" Flandre yelled as she slammed into the princess with all the strength she could muster. She was like a speeding comet with a multicoloured after image trailing behind her. All that momentum, all that force was concentrated in one almighty strike that hit Yuyuko squarely in the stomach.

She screamed in torment as her body was cruelly compressed by the concussive energy. Her eyes winced with the pain but in those final, fleeting moments she gazed into Flandre's eyes and admired the beautiful way that she had met her defeat.

"You truly are beautiful," Yuyuko forced out through gritted teeth before she was launched into her own black and white, swirling creation. As she hit the center, she was instantly swallowed up by the hungry black hole. A flock of barely visible white butterflies exploded from the raging eye of the storm and flew out in all directions before they too were sucked into oblivion.

With their strings cut, the remaining spirits blinked out of existence one by one. The soul sucking storm cannibalized itself without a master to guide it and it's immense pull weakened enough for Flandre to pull free of the powerful currents before she too shared Yuyuko's fate.

The ending of the battle was sounded by hundreds of falling objects as they crashed to the ground now that things had normalized. Suits of armour, pots and pans, large furniture and stuffed toys all were dragged back to earth as gravity reasserted itself. Flandre let out a large breath and slowly floated downwards herself. Her skin tingled all over and her ears had been painfully popped by the large implosion. She felt drained and immensely tired but she couldn't allow herself to fall asleep just yet.

*I have to reach the others. I have to make sure Cirno is alright!*

With that single thought driving her onward, she started to move towards the nearest intersection. She started running at a brisk pace to avoid burning the necessary energy to fly. Looking for her cloudy bag would have to wait for now. She looked up warily at the shelves that loomed up either side of her and wondered if they would remain upright after taking such a battering.

*No time to worry, I need to reach the others!*

Worryingly however, the sounds of winter that she had heard earlier had completely stopped by now. Whether that was because the battle had moved on to another area or some other reason, Flandre couldn't say. What she could feel however, now that the black and white vortex had subsided, was that another noticeable presence was nearby. One that hadn't been in the shop a moment before.

## Boundaries

Having finally dispatched Yuyuko, Flandre rushed forwards as fast as her legs would carry her. Though she would never admit the fact out loud, the battle had been quite a challenging affair and had left her feeling drained of energy. Her body was sore and tense from exertion and a strange, fluttering feeling persisted within her spirit which was probably a consequence of battling through Yuyuko's black hole of the netherworld.

Her skin still tingled from that violation but she couldn't allow herself even a moments rest as her companions might just need her help. The black, towering shelves and the large expanses between them all looked the same to Flandre as she turned yet another identical looking corner to find nobody waiting for her. Only the dusty items resting on the shelves themselves gave any indication that she was even in another part of the shop and she didn't have the time to carefully examine each and every single piece.

Only the sounds of her tapping footsteps filled the air as she ran down the expanse. A fact which was deeply concerning. Flandre had definitely heard the pitch of a blizzard and other sounds of winter was a good indication that Cirno and Letty had run into some form of trouble while she had been engaged in her hair raising duel, however, since then the shop had fallen as silent as a tome. Coupled with the strange new presence she had felt and Flandre had plenty of reason to suspect the worst.

The newcomer, if indeed it was a physical being at all, held an extremely weird presence in the material world. Like it somehow existed in multiple plains of existence at once. Even stranger than Yuyuko's otherworldly feeling.

*Ran is still out there somewhere. Could it belong to her? Possibly.*

Her wings were only glowing faintly as her spiritual self had been severely drained. The usually bright and vibrant colours had been dulled dramatically. Usually when she was in a stressful situation such as this, her wings and eyes glowed like a lively rainbow. This Flandre however looked to have clouds covering up her splendor. Still, she still had plenty of fight left within her and pushed herself onward.

She cursed under her breath as yet another empty and uneventful passageway greeted her. Her slender fists clenched with frustration. Why couldn't her impeccable senses detect even the slightest sign of life? It felt like the air around the shop had grown colder all of a sudden and was heavy with an undercurrent of magic, like someone had thrown a giant shroud over the entire building. Or was that just her imagination?

Flandre was surprised to find herself breathing heavily and stopped for a very moment to gather her thoughts. When a vampire stalked in the night, it was sometimes beneficial to remain still and motionless as you trusted your many heightened senses to guide you. Allow your prey to exert themselves while you remained calm and composed. Flandre closed her eyes, focused her mind and listened.

*Trust in yourself while remaining calm and dignified.*

That was a favorite saying of Remilia's which Flandre repeated to herself to aid her concentration. Simply thinking of her beloved sister made her feel more relaxed and at peace in this stressful situation. She painted a mental picture which ignored the physical, the ordinary, the mundane. Instead, a world of glowing, rippling lines and blotches of shimmering whiteness filled her vision. It was like stepping into an electrified, alternate reality. Some of the items resting on the overlooking shelves held weak, mystical energies.

Flandre ignored them since they were most likely magically infused trinkets or pendants. She couldn't feel the familiar, cold signatures of Letty or Cirno nor anyone else for that matter. This deep into the shop, there should have been no place that could escape her

extended senses but she could even detect the merest trace of life. She sighed.

*No, wait. There is definitely something still here, and nearby at that.*

Flandre blinked, her red eyes flashing with purpose as she speedily turned around and glanced up to her left.

*There!*

There was something hovering in midair. Something narrow that was blacker than night and rippled on the edge of reality. It looked like someone had cut out a narrow section of sky with a rusty pair of scissors. It twisted, never content to remain in a single form but remained somewhat narrow.

Bright red ribbons were attached to either end, which seemed incredibly out of place on such a curious oddity. As her eyes focused, Flandre noticed unsettling, white circular objects within the tear. With a shock she realized that they were large, unblinking eyeballs and all of them were watching her intently, as if possessed by a single mind or purpose.

Flandre saw a flash of movement within the rent, something other than the floating eyeballs. After which, the red ribbons swallowed up the length of the tear as if someone was sewing fabric back together. Then it blinked out of existence altogether like it was never there. Flandre frowned. She had only seen it for a few seconds. No sooner had she set eyes upon it, then it had disappeared. It felt like whoever had been responsible for the portal, if indeed that's what it was, hadn't wanted to be seen.

Could that have something to do with the possible disappearances? I'm extremely confident that I would have at least sensed Cirno by now. Familiar presences are always the easiest to detect, so where is she? All I've found is some floating, eyeball infested apparition. Maybe it has something to do with it? Maybe it chopped her up into shaved ice and devoured the icy fairy?

"I know you're out there somewhere," she challenged. That wasn't entirely true of course, but Flandre was sick of running around aimlessly and decided to try to bluff her way to the truth. Sometimes a shot in the dark was preferable to endless indecision.

"Come out, now! Show yourself and stop wasting my time."

Flandre's words bounced off the tall, imposing looking shelves and off into the unseen distance. She waited anxiously for a response while she carefully kept a careful watch on the immediate space around her.

The atmosphere was tense and filled with uncertainty. The shadowy shelves could be hiding any number of hidden threats. Flandre kept glancing down at the floor nervously as she had flashbacks to Yuyuko's hungry, pale spirits as they materialized through the floorboards.

The hairs on the back of Flandre's neck were prickling upwards in anticipation. A dull tearing sound made her jump inside her skin as she spun around to confront the potential danger. It was the same oddity as before but this time it was located on the ground and was uncomfortably close to Flandre. The tearing made was barely audible but what little you could actually hear gave off the same effect as sharp claws across a chalk board.

It became evident that it was indeed some kind of dimensional portal as a mysterious looking woman causally walked into reality as if it were no more impressive than opening a door. The red ribbons extended the rift make the transition as smooth as possible. That same limitless void of shifting blackness was the backdrop to this newcomer's grand entrance. Flandre wanted to look somewhere else, anywhere else that wasn't infested with sinister, floating eyeballs but she forced herself to stare into the abyss. If trouble was coming, then she would not shy away from it.

"Hello there," greeted the woman cheerfully. Her carefree attitude and arrogant smile suggested that she wasn't worried or threatened

in the slightest by Flandre's presence. That irked the vampire a little.

*Another one who thinks that they are untouchable. Well...*

"Congratulations on detecting me and defeating Yuyuko. I'm so very glad to meet you, little vampire. I must apologise for my friend's wanton actions. She knows that I prefer usage of danmaku over overt violence but some people just cannot be helped. You're not hurt are you?"

The mysterious woman stood tall and resolute, like nothing on this plain of existence could possibly faze her. She wore a silky smooth, frilly white dress with a sharp looking purple robe attached to the front that was decorated at the bottom by a striking flame motif that crawled up to her midriff. Her long blonde hair flowed around her in many tendrils that were bound at the end by extravagant red ribbons.

Her pure white hat was tied neatly around it's length by a thin thread of red. That ribbon was tied around the front in a kind of double loop. An expensive and elegant looking parasol was clutched in one hand. She had a beautiful figure and had the air of someone knowledgeable, like a fairy tail queen. She seemed curious of Flandre and studied the vampire with her deep, purple eyes.

Flandre shook her head. She decided to just be blunt since she didn't feel energetic enough to engage in the kind of wordplay she suspected this being wanted.

*Some people just enjoy hearing themselves speak far too much.*

"Listen. If you're planning on causing me trouble, then be warned by the example I made of Yuyuko. If you're looking to avenge her, then just say so because all I want to do is find my friends and leave, peacefully if at all possible. Return to wherever it is you came from and we'll get along fine."

"Oh? That's unfortunate as your friends are currently within my care."



Flandre narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. I invited them over to my residence and they just couldn't find it in themselves to refuse me. I can be very persuasive."

"Oh, is that so?" Flandre replied. Her irritation was growing by the second. "It seems that your trying to aggravate me for some reason. Well, it's working. You might think me weak after my recent activities but that would be a grave mistake. Why don't you just tell me what you want and why you were spying on me?"

The newcomer ran a finger through one of her golden strands of long hair and twirled her parasol absentmindedly. "Well, after such a spectacular battle, I was curious to see what you were like. You certainly have a flair for the dramatic. Tell me, do you know who I am?"

Flandre frowned. "No. Should I?"

The lady who stood before Flandre smiled in amusement. "I don't usually have to introduce myself, but my name is Yakumo Yukari."

She saw the flash of recognition appear across Flandre's face and nodded approvingly. "Good, it seems that you have at least heard of me. I decided to reveal myself to you in order to make you an offer. I will reunite you with your companions and forgive you for all your interfering actions if you agree to do me a little favor in return."

Flandre didn't like Yukari's condescending tone one bit. "Are you suggesting that I owe you an apology? That's ridiculous! Utterly ridiculous! For starters, your friend attacked me with the very real desire to end my life. She chased me and endangered my friends and tried to steal one of my precious possessions. And you expect me to apologise? Bah. You should be the one to apologise for all the hardships you have caused me."

Yukari tutted disapprovingly but the wry smile never left her lips. She sighed and pursed her lips in consideration. "You're a brave one, aren't you, little vampire? But maybe that bravery is born from ignorance, rather than strength. Well, no matter. Why don't we have a duel to decide matters? If you win, I'll abase myself and kneel in front of you in humble atonement. I'll even return your companions completely unharmed. But If I win, then you must do me a little favor? Does that sound appealing?"

Flandre grinned. She was excited at the prospect of testing herself against someone so famous despite feeling weakened from the whole ordeal beforehand. Letty seemed quite fearful of her and Flandre was determined to find out why. Still, if she wanted to help her friends, then this seemed to be the best way to do it.

"Oh, that sounds very appealing. If you insist on challenging me, then I guess I have no choice but to accept."

Yukari's smile widened and she held up smooth, well manicured hand to signify the beginning of the contest. "Excellent. Then let us begin, Flandre Scarlet."

Flandre blinked, dumbfounded. It felt like someone had just slapped her across the face with a wet blanket. Her forehead suddenly felt extremely hot and flustered. "W-what, what did you just call me?"

"Why, you're Flandre Scarlet correct?" Yukari replied mockingly. It was very clear from her tone of voice and sly smile that she was enjoying every single moment of this theatre. "Judging from your reaction, I haven't made a mistake. It's those wonderful wings of yours. I'd recognize those beautiful crystals anywhere."

Flandre stared incredulously at her opponent while she mentally did her best to calm down her racing heart. *Could she be a mind reader or wild some kind of dark magic?*

"I've never met you before in my entire life. How do you know me?"

"Well, Flandre. I often watch over Reimu whenever an incident is occurring, just to make sure everything is running smoothly. Well, that and if truth be told, I enjoy witnessing the spectacle of nefarious plans being foiled along with the climatic battles that ensue. Old gods and new, celestial beings, mysterious objects and tragic tales. For someone who has lived as long as I, Reimu's incidents provide endless hours of entertainment. I remember all the trouble at the Scarlet devil mansion. That was certainly one of my more memorable evenings."

Yukari winked at Flandre with those last few words and let them hang in the air. The longer the silence went on the more weight those words gained and the more uncomfortable Flandre became, which was probably Yukari's goal in the first place. Letty did mention something about the gap demon, as she put it, being somewhat of a trickster. Flandre had only been in her presence for a few moments and already she believed Letty's impression. Yukari's bemused demeanor and her subtle threats painted her as a manipulator.

*And I'm playing right into her hands. Well, actions speak louder than words. So she knows my name? So what?*

Flandre let out a breath and opened a dark, shifting portal of her own. It flowed like shadowy water and droplets floated away as they lost purchase in the physical realm. Her creamy arm disappeared into the gloom and started to pull out her trusted weapon, Lavateinn. The slight weight felt comforting in her hand, like a trusted friend was watching over her. The surface of Lavateinn gleamed with barely restrained power. Yukari looked on curiously.

"Well, none of that matters, right? We have a duel to commence." Flandre limbered up her arm and flexed her powers by letting a crackle of shining lightening climb along the length of her demonic looking blade. Her blonde hair rippled under the invisible waves.

Yukari clicked her fingers like a gunshot before the race. "Fine, Flandre. Let us begin our duel. My opening gambit is blackmail.

Submit to me or I will reveal the fact to your beloved sister that you have left the mansion without permission."

Once again, Flandre felt like the rug had been pulled out from under her. Like she was in perpetual free fall after being shoved off a cliff.

*What, what, what? What kind of duel is this? Trickery! This is such shameless behaviour!*

Flandre's grip tightened around the hilt of her sparkling weapon. She felt outraged and snapped her sharp teeth together in a threatening manner. At that moment, all the fatigue evaporated from her system as anger overtook her.

"Such cowardice! Have you no pride? Resorting to such underhanded methods!"

"Oh? Is slicing somebody to ribbons somehow better than using your mind to overcome an opponent?" Yukari inquired as she arched an eyebrow inquisitively. "I'm a very prideful person, Flandre, and do not intend to lose this duel. In fact ensuring your victory before a single spell has been cast should be admired. You should be able to use all your facets in a duel. We never did agree to specified rules, remember?"

"I remember you well, Flandre Scarlet. The troublesome, often unbalanced little sister; the dark little secret hidden away from sight. There is no way that Remilia would have given you permission to leave the mansion unattended, or at all for the matter and yet here you are, standing before me. Oh, it seems that you dislike me speaking about your family. Did I speak out of turn? Just to crush the fleeting hope that you could defeat me before I reveal what I know, I have instructed my loyal Shikigami Ran to carry out my will in the unlikely event that I do not return. Well, what say you, vampire? Will you submit peacefully?"

Flandre's shoulders slumped a little as some of the fiery energy that had fueled her anger rapidly escaped her body. She wasn't stupid

and wasn't blinded enough by rage to forget her deepest, soul crushing fear; that her sister would stop loving her. That nightmare might become a reality if she were to find out that her younger sister disobeyed her by breaking her confinement. Yukari had been right as Flandre had hoped to pacify this particular threat with her otherworldly strength but it seemed that little thread of hope had been cruelly cut.

Still, Flandre was determined not to utter the words "I submit." That would be utterly humiliating and would shatter her pride beyond repair. Sure, she had very rarely lost danmaku duels in the past but she had never actually given in voluntarily. If you were to look at Flandre from the outside, you would see almost no hints of her self doubt and internal dilemma.

She wouldn't sweeten things by appearing weak and indecisive. Flandre took a page out of her sister's book and took the momentary setback with calm composure and dignity. Just a slight frown and an irritated flicker at the corner of her mouth could be seen if you were really looking out for it.

"So," Flandre asked as she dismissed Lavateinn. It shimmered before fizzling out of existence in a black cloud. "What particular favor did you have in mind? I won't do anything demeaning."

Yukari seemed pleased with the vampire's decision and twirled her parasol in celebration. "Don't worry, Flandre," she said cheerfully. "You have placed yourself in safe hands. Oh, we will have such fun working together."

Yukari gestured with one hand and a portal ripped itself into the material realm. That same, faint tearing sound as before made Flandre feel like a dentist was scraping her teeth with some unpleasant looking metal implement. It gave her a sense of unease. First the red ribbons appeared and gradually pulled and pulled until the dimensional rift had widened enough to allow safe passage into whatever alternative world it had opened.

Yukari pointed towards the portal with her parasol. "Follow me, Flandre." When she noticed Flandre's predictable hesitation, she smiled invitingly and beckoned her onward. Like a mother leading her child across the road, she held out a welcoming hand.

"Don't worry, this boundary is completely harmless and will carry us to our destination. You can hold my hand if want."

Flandre frowned at this show of blatant disrespect. "I'm not worried at all. If you really did observe me, then you'd know that."

Yukari smiled again and walked right into the portal, or boundary as she called it. It didn't swallow her up and spit out the bones, nor did it rip her apart like entering a black hole. The only disturbance to the tranquil, black surface was a slight ripple as Yukumo Yukari took her first steps into the boundary. Well, that, and the floating eyeballs that watched her with intense scrutiny but she didn't pay them any heed and calmly walked inside the portal until she disappeared from sight.

Flandre didn't loose sight of her blackmailer immediately. It looked like the impenetrable blackness parted without resistance before her and then gently swept in behind her which gave the effect of a shifting, solid mass like jelly. But it couldn't have been solid because it was transparent. Flandre could see the floating eyeballs after all and other oddities that she couldn't identify such as sudden flashes of colour that wouldn't exist on any normal painters pallet. The whole affair was frankly quite scary but fascinating at the same time. Like setting something on fire, danger was often exciting.

After a few seconds, Yukari could no longer be seen for whatever reason. The boundary remained open but didn't look very warm and inviting from Flandre's perceptive. It looked like something that should be sealed away or avoided like an unnatural disaster. With the temptress gone, Flandre allowed her controlled expression to return to normal, namely one of worry. Was she really going to step into the monster's mouth, and willingly at that? It seemed suicidal.

Yukari was unharmed, but she would be, would she? Well, if I don't enter the boundary, then what else do I do? My friends are supposedly in there somewhere, perhaps even taken hostage.

Flandre walked up to the shifting portal and tentatively stuck her index finger into it's center. The black surface rippled and besides a slight drop in temperature, nothing else happened. She pulled back her finger and was relieved to find that it hadn't been bitten off and devoured by demons hiding just beyond reality.

The eyeballs watched Flandre's every move but she didn't even meet their gaze. This close, Flandre could see that it really did resemble a dark mirror. The other side looked like restrained chaos with the brief storms of colour in the deep-seated darkness but was otherwise strangely devoid of activity.

*Well, thinking about it isn't going to get me anywhere.*

Flandre took a deep breath and with as much confidence as she could manage, she carefully stepped into the boundary while trying her best to imitate Yukari's posture and footing. Inside, her vision was severely impaired. Some things in the distance could be seen, however sometimes when she turned her head, nothing but darkness filled her eyesight.

It wasn't darkness in the traditional sense, but the kind that a vampires eyes couldn't piece. And yet, she could still see ever present eyeballs without fail. A fact that she wasn't grateful for even in the slightest. They blinked and their pupils widened whenever she made the mistake of meeting their dreary gaze.

It was cold but not enough to be uncomfortable. The only sound was a constant dull humming like the pressure one would hear while inside a submarine. Every step Flandre took only served to unnerve her further. There was no ground to speak of so every step was in itself, a leap of faith. The vampire felt weightless and everything had a lack of purchase to it. Looking down gave her a sense of vertigo as

the flooring was just another mostly featureless expanse of black space.

"Hello," she whispered, simply to help herself stay sane. The word didn't echo at all and was sniffled out in an instant. Sound apparently didn't carry in this place. Flandre's heart rate increased with every step and sweat trickled down her brow. She cursed at the voices inside her head that taunted her about never being able to escape this place and how foolish she had been for entering it in the first place. Mostly because those voices were her own insecurities, her own mental weaknesses.

Then, Flandre took another step, just like any other and then suddenly she found herself plummeting downwards for no discernable reason. She screamed in panic and tried to sink her claws into something but it was like trying to grasp vapor.

Flandre tried to control her decent by flying but she couldn't even tell which direction was up and down anymore, assuming such concepts even existed in this dimension. It was all a spinning blur that sped before her eyes alarmingly fast. An inescapable death spiral.

Flandre snarled in rage at the nearest floating eye and used it as a vessel for all the fear and anger that had been thrust upon her. Her hand sparkled with power, the light immediately swallowed up by the oppressive atmosphere. Whether or not her shot hit it's mark or made any difference at all was lost on Flandre as she twisted and turned down this invisible tunnel.

She couldn't even gauge how fast she was falling. Everything felt the same and different at the same time. Her own sense of wrongness only intensified as time went on. If this wasn't limbo or purgatory then it was a pretty good imitation of it.

Flandre gasped as she saw light at the end of the tunnel. Not the kind of light you might see in a near death experience, but physical, bright heavenly light that bathed Flandre in welcoming brilliance. She



had never felt so happy or relieved and wanted nothing more than to escape this hellish, endless eclipse once and for all.

She outstretched her arms as the white glow enveloped her surroundings and served to lift her spirit. A serene feeling spread throughout her as she fell right into the center of the flashing beacon and then all that disappeared as she emerged back into reality like a slap across the face.

All the weight returned to her form and she stumbled and fell forwards onto her hands and knees. Flandre gasped for fresh air that wasn't tainted by the bleak atmosphere of the boundary. She felt dirty and tainted and wanted to take a long soothing shower to purge her body of impurities. She rubbed her hands together. Flandre didn't feel particularly cold but the simple, familiar gesture made her feel a little better.

"The first time is always the worst," came a polite sounding voice.

Flandre opened her eyes and rapidly pushed herself to her feet. She felt vulnerable and pathetic and didn't want anyone to liken her to a common beggar. The voice had belonged to the nine tailed fox Ran who stood in front of a large wooden gate. Her expression was one of duty and her tone of voice was businesslike and utterly professional. Flandre didn't detect any malice or deceit, unlike with Yukari. If Ran held any animosity towards Flandre for striking her earlier, than she hid it with practiced ease.

"Welcome to my master's home," said Ran. "Mistress Yukari is expecting you."

Flandre stared at Ran for a moment while she gathered herself together. The Kitsune had intelligent golden eyes that matched her warm looking, golden tails. She had apparently changed into clean clothing as the scorch marks were no longer present around her stomach. Ran patiently waited for the vampire but something in her expression suggested that Flandre probably shouldn't hang around for too long.

For the first time, Flandre fully took in her surrounds. Behind Ran stood a large, oriental looking home that was comprised mostly of intricately carved wood and walls of bamboo with not a single stone or brown brick in sight. It had thin, folding doors and long bamboo walkways. Compact towers looked down on the tiled roof and gave the house the religious look of a temple of worship. Talismans and paper charms were tied to various places with string but didn't move due to the lack of wind. Flandre could faintly hear the soft patter of falling water from somewhere within the building's grounds.

Besides the house, the rest of the area was a featureless, white void of nothingness. Flandre hadn't noticed before because her eyes had been closed shut, but the very ground she stood on was the purest shade of white she had ever seen.

No trees, no wildlife, no nothing. Worst of all, it had no texture to it. Picture a sheet of paper or a blank canvas and you'd have this place. It felt like the exact opposite of the boundary, only even more lonely and desolate. If it wasn't for the house, then this vast expanse of space would have been completely empty in every sense of the word.

"What is this place?" Flandre breathed. The surreal nature of this location made her momentarily forget that she wasn't totally alone.

"Lady Yukari doesn't like to be unduly bothered. This is her own, personal space that no intruder could ever hope to find," Ran answered before beckoning her onward with a baggy, sleeved hand.

"Please, come this way. Your friends are waiting safely within the household."

Ran opened the main gate and looked at Flandre expectantly. The vampire didn't need any more motivation and took her first steps inside the Yakumo household. Ran closed the doors behind her which groaned with the weight. Flandre felt uneasy exposing her back but kept her ears open for any signs of trouble.

The inside was strikingly different to the Scarlet devil mansion. The walls were made up of handcrafted, wooden paneling that gleamed with a smooth finish. Various paintings adorned the walls, many of them portraits. Many of them Flandre didn't recognize but a few of them wore the same red and white miko outfit that was almost identical to Reimu's. Another one was a somber looking Yuyuko resting under a breathtaking sakura tree at full bloom.

Sliding doors were spaced at various intervals on both sides of the corridor. Burning incense candles filled the passageway with exotic fragrances that ruffled the nose. They passed an open door that led out into a garden that was rich with greenery and colour.

Beautiful, well maintained flowerbeds were expertly arranged in dazzling displays that demanded attention and a miniature waterfall constantly sent a cascade of rippling water down a series of rocks and into a spacious pond. Ran didn't say a word so Flandre peered at the garden while she could but kept on walking.

Flandre was starting to grow weary of the constant walking but finally Ran called a halt to the proceedings and indicated a sliding door that looked like any other and remained annoyingly silent until Flandre walked up towards it. Then she unceremoniously shoved Flandre inside and quickly closed the sliding doors. Flandre stumbled inside and looked beside her angrily while clenching her fists tightly at this sudden rudeness.

"Ah, welcome to my home," said Yakumo Yukari who was reclining in a comfy looking chair. "I'm very much glad that you made it here safely."

There was one other occupied chair whose occupant smiled up at Flandre with undisguised cheerful delight. Someone who couldn't possibly have been casually pouring herself another generous refilling of sake like nothing had ever happened.

"Boo" said Yuyuko.

## Bad Company

"You're not supposed to be here!" Flandre exclaimed when she saw Yuyuko cheerfully enjoying a steaming cup of liquid while sitting down in a seiza position under a low table. She seemed very much alive and well which shouldn't have been possible considering that she had been swallowed up by her own soul tearing black hole.

"Oh, I can assure you, she is," remarked Yukari Yakumo as she herself took a relaxing sip of whatever it was they were drinking. "I invited her here."

Both Youkai were keeling down on fluffy looking cushions which were themselves under a small, immaculately polished wooden table. Upon the table sat a fully furnished tea set that looked fit for royalty. The room Flandre found herself in was much like the rest of the house. Bamboo and wooden paneling across the walls and various incense holds, hanging charms and paintings. The only difference was the large number of fabulously embroidered cushions, which made it look like a scene straight out of Aladdin. Conspicuously, there was an empty cushion and teacup which suggested that they expected Flandre to join them in their cosy little get-together.

"That's not what I meant," Flandre said, her face a little flustered at having seen an apparent ghost from the past. "She was sucked up into that giant, endless void. She should be dead so why is she sitting there with a smirk on her face?"

Yuyuko answered that question herself and took no small amount of pleasure from the vampire's shocked expression. "My, my, how rude to just pronounce someone dead like that. Well, if you want to be technical, I'm not really fully alive in the first place. I have the best of both worlds. Secondly, that 'endless void' simply is a gateway to Hakugyokurou, though it can be rather harmful for those ill suited too it, such as anything alive."

"Such as me," Flandre stated flatly. The whole formal atmosphere was making her nervous. It appeared to her like the gathering after a funeral, only the person in question was still very much alive. Or dead, or whatever Yuyuko's current state of existing was known as.

"Anyway, I'm only here because Yukari shamelessly blackmailed me and kidnapped my friends. If you're a sore loser and came here seeking revenge then it will have to wait."

Yuyuko seemed genuinely bewildered and placed a finger underneath her chin. "Revenge? Why would I want revenge for such a dazzling and fantastic display? If anything, I should be apologizing for my forceful behaviour."

Flandre could never tell if this so called princess of the netherworld was seriously clueless or just playacting underneath the surface. She seemed whimsical and had a musical voice that lulled you into a false sense of security but Flandre always had the deep-seated suspicion that she was simply being toyed with. With Yukari however, the suspicion was completely out in the open.

"I apologise, Flandre Scarlet," said Yuyuko while placing a great emphasis on Flandre's given name. The intention was obviously to make her feel uncomfortable so Flandre made sure not to take the bait. She thanked Yuyuko for the gracious apology and curtsied without a trace of sincerity. Yukari chuckled as Flandre boldly took her place at the table without waiting for a formal invitation to join the gathering. Yuyuko smiled at the slight in apparent good humor.

"My, you're a confident one, aren't you, Flandre Scarlet," said Yukari. She indicated the steaming cup that was now directly in front of Flandre with a single, well manicured finger. "Please, help yourself."

Flandre fidgeted underneath the table in a vain attempt to make kneeling on the floor more comfortable. She looked down at the bubbling green liquid and gulped. It smelled pleasant enough; the scent of freshly picked green leaves. What gave Flandre pause however was that the only way it could have resembled the

stereotypical image of poison even further was for the cup to have a skull and crossbones painted on the front.

"Not thirsty?" inquired Yukari as she took another sip. Flandre swallowed hard as she watched the mysterious liquid disappear down Yukari's gullet with long, gratifying gulps.

*Maybe she has a boundary open inside her stomach or something? Maybe that's why she isn't all big and plump.*

Despite her surrounds, Flandre suppress a snigger at the thought of a bottomless hole of a woman. She picked up the cup in front of her and studied it thoughtfully. It smelt like a natural mixture of herbs with an little extra something to spice up the flavor. Flandre picked up the cup and tentatively placed it to her lips.

"It's really tasty, isn't it?" asked Yuyuko who had used the vampire's moment of preoccupation to shuffle herself right next to her unwilling guest and was now leaning over to study Flandre's reactions with unnerving interest. Flandre noticed a presence looming close to her and glanced over to find that incredibly unsettling, smiling face only inches away from her own.

"What's wrong, Flandre?" asked Yuyuko innocently.

Flandre's heart turned to ice and she immediately jerked herself away by reflex, in doing so she ended up spilling a few droplets of the green liquid against her face. She pushed herself away.

"W-what are you thinking, sneaking up on me like that?"

*It looked like she was about to kiss me or something. Ewww, so creepy!*

"Don't worry about Yuyuko," said Yukari cheerfully. "She has just taken a liking to you, that's all."

"That's right. How could I not?" confirmed Yuyuko a little too enthusiastically. "Oh, it looks like you dirtied your face. You can be so clumsy sometimes Flandre, but I guess that's kind of cute in it's own way."

She produced an elegantly embroidered, pink handkerchief and thrust it at Flandre who deftly avoided it with all the skill of a child avoiding their overly affectionate parent. It didn't seem threatening in any obvious way but every instinct inside Flandre's body screamed at her to avoid the apparently harmless gesture, if only so that Yuyuko didn't get the wrong idea.

"What are you playing at?" exclaimed Flandre. "Don't think I'll forgive you just because of a few niceties. We're still enemies so please, keep your hands to yourself!"

Yuyuko withdrew the handkerchief and pouted disapprovingly. Yukari chuckled lightly at her friend's displeasure.

"But we're not enemies anymore, are we? Yuyuko was trying to offer a peace offering and make up for her very unladylike display. I do so dislike it when people conveniently forget to follow the danmaku rules that I so painstakingly established for everyone to follow. It makes Gensokyo a much more pleasant place for everyone but some people can be so frustratingly stubborn."

Flandre felt like pointing out that since leaving the mansion, hardly anyone that she had met during her travels had actually followed those rules. In fact, Cirno had been the only one to challenge her to an honest, fair and square danmaku duel rather than simply trying to snuff out her existence completely. But of course, doing so wouldn't have been polite so Flandre held her tongue.

*Sister always tells me to be polite while a guest at another's table. I just wish Yuyuko wouldn't leer at me all the time. There is definitely something seriously wrong with that one. Well, not that Yukari isn't creepy in her own devious way. She tries to act aloof but a backstabber is still a backstabber whichever way you cut it. I'd like to*

*being them both down a peg or two but for now I have no choice but to listen obediently and nod my head every now and then like a good little girl. Well, that won't last forever, so enjoy me playing house while it lasts!*

"Where are my friends?" asked Flandre.

*If the wool is being pulled over my eyes, then I promise that I'll level this place to the ground.*

"They're here, safe and sound in another room. Now, let us move onto more pressing issues," said Yukari as she attempted to shift the conversation to a more serious tone. "I'm glad that you graciously accepted to help me this fine evening, Flandre, as I have a very important job that only you can accomplish."

*More like blackmailed, you stupid-face!*

Yukari reached under the table and produced a small object that was wrapped in a warm and comfy looking blue cloth. She set it down carefully and unwrapped it with care and attention. The familiar sight of the sunstone was revealed to Flandre once more, that tiny little thing that had brought her so much hardship and excitement. She had grown quite attached to it as a result, like an old war comrade.

"Yuyuko collected this little souvenir when it was sucked up along with herself, and with many of Rinnosuke's belongings. I'll have to smooth things over with him later on it seems." She shot Yuyuko a displeased look which was met with a playful wink of the eye.

"Anyway," Yukari continued. "Since you went through so much trouble to hold onto this little trinket, I shall return it to you. All that I ask of you, is that you lose it again for me."

"Lose it?" Inquired Flandre. "If you don't want it anymore, then I'll gladly take it."



"That isn't exactly what I meant, Flandre. I want you to pretend to be defeated by one of Isabelle's lackeys and in the process, lose the sunstone. You see, the problem is that Isabelle is quite cowardly and refuses to come out into the open so if she somehow came into possession of something that could be tracked, then I could subtly guide Reimu to her location for one of those fabulous battles for the very fate of Gensokyo that I do so very much love to bare witness to."

"And," Yuyuko chimed in cheerfully. "I'm the only one capable of feeling and following the unique spiritual feel that I have infused the sunstone with, hence nobody will ever know that they are unwitting playing into our hands."

While she was talking, Yuyuko shuffled a little closer to Flandre while the vampire made sure she shuffled in an equal distance in the other direction. Moving around the table as they were, it resembled a game of musical chairs until Flandre was blocked by a very bemused Yukari. Yuyuko scoffed that her advances were apparently unwanted.

"Well, that's nice and everything, but you don't need me for such a trivial task," said Flandre. "Just lose it yourself or simply drop it out of thin air right in front of them with one of your convenient boundaries. I said I wouldn't do anything demeaning, and losing on purpose is definitely demeaning!"

Since they were so now sitting so closely together, Flandre could see the slight stiffening in Yukari's posture. It was clear that she didn't much care for Flandre's flat out refusal or tone of voice. Yukari's deep, purple eyes fixed the younger Scarlet sister with an unwavering gaze that felt like someone had lashed chains around her heart. Flandre didn't like being looked down on but Yukari held power over her, at least for the time being.

"Don't be so flippant with me, young lady. You've caused me a great deal of trouble by not only refusing to hand over the sunstone, but actively thwarting my attempts to recover it by running around with it

aimlessly all night. It's only because I'm so generous that I'm giving you the chance to atone for your sins. Why did you keep the sunstone when it became apparent that it would put you into harms way? Why did you leave the mansion, Flandre? Because you wanted to experience the outside world and escape the normality of your everyday existence, isn't that right? Don't fight me, Flandre Scarlet. I'm giving you the opportunity to be part of something larger than yourself."

Yuyuko summoned a beautiful, shimmering butterfly with colourful wings that rested gracefully on the end of her little finger. "If you want to spread your wings, then help us."

Flandre saw the obvious connection that she was the shining butterfly but also the unsettling vision that she was a puppet dancing on their fingertips.

"Fine," Flandre huffed. She felt a little deflated on the inside because events were progressing along just nicely without bothering to ask for the vampire's consent. Like the red threads of Remilia's destiny were at work, only against Flandre rather than in her favor.

"Excellent!" said Yukari who seemed quite happy at the prospect of another ally to burden her intrigues with while she watched from the sidelines.

"What wonderful news!" exclaimed Yuyuko as she grinned and seized the sweet opportunity provided to practically lunge at the horrified vampire. Flandre could only see flapping blue robes and grasping hands as she gasped and immediately shot up out of her crouching position like a bolt of lightening. Instead of landing on Flandre's soft, supple skin, Yuyuko's obsessive embrace instead landed on the cold, unfeeling wood of the table. Yuyuko outstretched her arms across the table and sighed.

Flandre looked outraged. She found herself blushing with uncertainty at how to react. Her chest was breathing heavily and her hands trembled like she had just dodged a speeding bullet. She wasn't

used to this inappropriate behavior considering her rather strict surroundings inside Remilia's mansion.

"W-what are you doing, grabbing at me like that! I'm not your doll so keep your grasping hands to yourself!"

"So mean," Yuyuko whimpered who felt extremely dejected about having been denied her treat. Flandre held no sympathy for the apparently bipolar princess who shifted from emotions quicker than the swings of a grandfather clock. Unless she was a master manipulator who was playacting to downplay her own strength or something? Flandre narrowed her eyes accusingly.

*That one is a total weirdo! I can handle someone trying to harm me but something like this...*

Yukari tutted and patted her friend reassuringly on her soft, blue hat while Yuyuko sulked and twirled a finger absentmindedly on the table's surface. The Youkai of boundaries looked up at Flandre and nodded towards the sliding door.

"Maybe this would be a good opportunity to enjoy a sweet but brief reunion with your completely unharmed friends. Please, go ahead."

Flandre could tell that it was more of a statement than a question which meant that business had apparently been concluded for the time being. Yukari then proceeded to give her guest a series of directions which Flandre rapidly forgot as she eagerly exited the room as soon as humanly possible.

Finally alone, she let out a breath and looked around at her surroundings. Nothing had changed and nothing moved an inch. Flandre had a vague recollection of where she was meant to go and walked down the unfamiliar corridor while listening out for the welcoming banter of her companions.

Hanging charms twirled overhead as Flandre silently crept under them. She was walking on the balls of her feet to avoid any creaking

floorboards which might betray her location. Flandre knew that she was acting silly since she was a guest but moving cautiously came almost second nature to her while in an unfamiliar environment. It didn't help that the paintings seemed to be watching her with their lifeless eyes. As she wandered the empty hallways, Flandre was surprised at just how large this oriental looking house seemed to be.

There seemed to be an endless amount of sliding doors that all held the promise of reuniting with her long lost friends but only one of them would grant that request. Flandre opened a few of them just enough for her curious mind to have a little peak inside. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

The rooms matched the general style that she expected. Wooden furniture adorned with pristine white fabric that looked smoother than silk. Charms, scrolls and various trinkets. The strangest thing to Flandre was the complete lack of tables and chairs. Instead, in their place were cushions and pillows.

*What an odd place.*

Flandre heard the sound of rushing water long before she reached the entrance of the indoor garden. It was surround on all sides by bamboo poles and had a refreshing looking lake which gave it the warm atmosphere of an indoor bathhouse. It also boasted an open ceiling design that provided a breathtaking view of the night's sky which should have been impossible considering the white void that surrounded the Yakumo household. Probably some kind of magical trickery but it looked far too real to be a simple illusion.

Flandre was honestly impressed and played with the idea of exploring the picturesque garden but eventually decided against it and moved on. She eventually found herself staring up at the creepy looking portrait of Yuyuko. Flandre shuddered inwardly as she imagined ghostly hands running across every inch of her defenseless body. Suddenly Flandre wanted nothing more than to see Cirno's cheerful face and boundless energy to cleanse her pallet of this disturbing place.

She sighed and walked briskly down the wooden walkway but hadn't taken more than a few steps before a scowling face poked itself out from seemingly nowhere. Flandre gasped and almost jumped right out of her skin. The face frowned at her and clearly wasn't at all happy at the vampire's presence. Flandre blinked.

*Are those cat ears?*

The youthful, almost childish face did indeed have a matching set of black, furry cat ears that fluttered in Flandre's direction. A single, gleaming gold hoop earring hung from the left one and dangled slightly as the face glowered at her with displeasure. A bright green, frilly hat sat atop her short cut, black hair. She was hanging out of an open door frame with one clawed hand digging into the woodwork. It was obvious that the newcomer would rather sink her claws into Flandre's flesh.

"I don't like you!" said the catgirl before hissing at Flandre at such a high pitch that it made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. The girl seemed genuinely upset as her eyes were watery and her nose sniffled every time she blinked.

"You hurt Ran, you mean spirited demon! I hope you get a nice crispy suntan, you stupid bloodsucker!"

With that said, she stuck her tongue out at Flandre before sulking back into the room out of sight. Flandre was almost surprised enough to not take offense. Almost. Her forehead throbbed with anger and she rushed over towards the sliding door hard enough to splinter the wood but the room waiting within was completely empty. Just another living room just like all the others with no obvious way out besides the exit that Flandre herself was blocking. With no target to vent her vicious displeasure on, Flandre just grumbled and moved on while trying to remember the correct direction to take.

Soon enough, Flandre was rewarded when she heard the hyperactive ice fairy yammering on about something in her usually high pitched and energetic tone. Her voice was muffled by the thin

wooden walls but there was no mistaking it. Flandre's heart fluttered and filled with happiness. She smiled a smile that she wouldn't have dared show Cirno in person, lest she die from embarrassment.

She walked up and stood outside the door before letting out a small breath. She hesitated for a moment to make sure that she appeared sufficiently aloof before sliding it open.

Cirno and Letty looked up at the unexpected intrusion. Flandre was glad to see some familiar faces again but that feeling was totally eclipsed by the boundless relief that welled up in the small fairy's chest.

"Flandre!" she exclaimed and bounded up to the vampire so quickly that Flandre didn't even have time to congratulate Cirno on actually using her given name. Flandre gasped as she felt chilly hands wrap around her waist which immediately sucked all the warmth from her body. Her skin tingled and while she enjoyed the fact that Cirno was happy to see her, she didn't want to freeze to death in the process.

"Ok, ok!" Flandre said as she attempted to pry the grasping fairy away from her body. "I'm glad to see you too but do you realize how cold you feel?" She could help but liken the feeling to when she had mistakenly grafted her sensitive tongue onto an ice lolly.

Cirno finally got the hint and reluctantly released her surprising firm hold. She looked up at Flandre and sniffled. "You're the one who's being cold here! I'm just happy to see you, that's all. What's so wrong with that?"

"N-nothing," Flandre answered as she averted her gaze. *I hope I'm not blushing. I'd better not be!*

Letty was much more mature about things but even her relief was readily apparent. Her white skin was as pale as ever but Flandre's return provided her cheeks with a shade of rosy red. She greeted Flandre with a warm looking smile and a curt nod. "I'm so glad that you are safe and sound, Flandre. I feared the worse when we were

snatched up by the gap demon's minion and dropped into this room like garbage. We were told in no uncertain terms to await for your arrival and that any attempts in escape would result in us experiencing eternal limbo in a pocket dimension. Our own personal hell, as Yukari so elegantly put it."

"Yeah," Cirno piped up. "I wasn't scared or anything, even thought that dark portal thingy was really terrifying, kinda. Well, forget about that! Now that we're reunited, we don't need to listen to that old windbag anymore! That Yukari actually had the nerve to think that I was your maid! Just because I'm a fairy, it doesn't automatically mean that I work for someone else, right?"

Cirno waited smugly with her arms placed firmly on her hips for Flandre to chime in and agree with her. When all she received was a blank stare, she glanced back at Letty who gave her a sympathetic nod. Cirno grumbled and continued.

"Do you know that woman, Flan? Because she seems to know you. She said that you battled against Reimu, did you ever tell me that? But that isn't the most shocking thing! When I asked her if she remembered me and my duel with Reimu, she looked down at me like I was lying and said that she had no recollection of an ice fairy ever fighting the shrine maiden and that fairy's that told tall tales would be reincarnated into a rodent! Can you believe it!"

Cirno, like a giant pair of bellows, had done a great job of firing up her own burning sense of injustice. Flandre patted her friend on the head and while she could see the funny side of things she resisted her mean streak this one time.

*Poor little Cirno.*

Flandre decided that this would be a good time to explain what Yukari had told her which would also serve to calm Cirno down. She had to work around the whole blackmail angle since revealing that would also force her to answer some rather inconvenient questions but she decided to tell the truth while leaving out a few choice

details. Cirno and Letty listened with great interest as Flandre told them that they had no choice but to cooperate with Yukari's nefarious scheme or they wouldn't be allowed to leave this place, which as far as Flandre knew, was completely true.

Flandre's captive audience looked like they had a few questions of their own but before one of them could raise their hand, there was a short, sharp knock on the sliding door.

"It's time to depart," came Ran's stern sounding voice that brook no argument. "Alyssia has been sighted."

*Alyssia, where have I heard that name before?*

Ran pulled the door open and a wave of twirling, golden tails filled the hallway behind her. Flandre's nose twitched with the pleasant, sunny fragrance of bushy fur. Ran looked down at Flandre with that same spiteful look and the Kitsune's jaw clenched.

Clearly time had not healed the wounds to her pride but duty dictated that Flandre was a guest and was not to be harmed. She towered over the vampire and seemed like a strong pillar of refinement and authority compared to the more unruly Flandre who was smaller but was filled to the brim with a wild, occasionally destructive personality that always boiled just under the surface.

Ran stepped to one side and allowed the trio of adventures to pass her while directing them towards the garden where Yukari would be eagerly awaiting their presence. Letty nodded politely and was the first one to exit the room while the others eventually starting moving after baring witness to Ran's silent but unwavering pressure.

Cirno watched the nine tailed fox with a sparkle of curiosity as they walked down the corridor that apparently lead them towards the beautiful garden. The icy fairy was totally bewitched by the shining, warm looking tails. Nine shifting snakes that had Cirno hypnotized under their spell.



She reached out and brushed her hand against one of the warm and welcoming looking tails and smiled at the pleasing sensation that flooded throughout her that one usually got when petting a much loved pet. It was abrasive but fluffy and tickled in a nice way. Flandre glanced over at what she was doing and was almost instantly overwhelmed by the desire to join in the fun. Her mouth hung open in anticipation as she tentatively prodded the nearest shifting tail with her index finger.

It was warm and softer than any pillow or satin sheet had any right to be. Flandre had never experienced anything like it and immediately wanted more so she carefully and painstakingly grasped one of the tails in her hand like a master thief. She held it aloft, much like a trophy. The length of the furry tail flinched but its owner didn't seem to notice.

The texture felt great in the vampire's hands and she would have happily snuggled up and fallen asleep in its heavenly embrace. Reluctantly, she released the tail before Ran noticed and gingerly repeated the process several times. The feeling of that velvety, smooth forest flowing through her fingers was indisputably awesome and incredibly serene at the same exact moment.

Cirno grew jealous and scowled like someone else was playing with her favorite toy. She attempted to lightly grasp a fluffy tail but lacked the patience, skill and tact that Flandre had developed over her many long years of stalking in the night. Well that, and the fact that her touch was essentially several ice cubes strung together in the shape of a hand. Ran's nine tails all at once suddenly started twisting and twirling like a yellow, nine tentacled monster that had been rudely disturbed by unwary travelers.

Ran stopped walking and glared behind her with a stare that was as cold as ice. Her yellow eyes narrowed at her two, smaller followers who tried to look as completely innocent and uninterested as they could manage. Her long, colour of sunshine tails beat at the floor in a steady pounding of displeasure.

"What's the hold up?" asked Flandre. "We shouldn't keep your master waiting, right?"

Ran frowned hard enough to produce several deep furrows across her forehead. Flandre thought she was either going to lash out at them in a storm of anger, or explode in a shower of feathery fur.

The moment lingered for an uncomfortably long time, long enough to even make Flandre shift on the spot but it passed and Ran turned back around and resumed her walk with as much dignity as she could managed. The Kitsune grumbled under her breath about the kinds of things she had to put up with while under the employ of Yukari.

Flandre and Cirno both looked at each other and giggled. Letty had caught on and glowered down at both of them until the self satisfied smirks disappeared from their youthful faces. She lightly slapped the backs of both of their naughty heads, much to the chagrin of Flandre.

*Letty is quickly turning into another stuffy Sakuya. Well, it was worth it. If Ran ever tries to fight me, then making a lovely fur rug out of her nine tails would be a priceless comfort!*

Flandre smiled at the thought until they walked into the relaxing indoors garden. Yukari and Yuyuko were waiting for them in among a breathtaking display of flowerbeds and overhanging plants that crept up the walls on wooden supports. The two Youkai were a fitting addition to the arrangement as they were beautiful like a regal blue and purple flower respectively.

The well trimmed grass crinkled underfoot and the miniature waterfall provided a pleasing backdrop to proceedings. When she noticed the motley crew approaching her, Yukari smirked and toyed with one of her blonde locks of hair. Yuyuko chuckled and waved in greeting.

"Welcome," said Yuyuko cheerfully. "Isn't it nice that everyone is together now in such a gorgeous setting?"

Yukari glanced at her servant. The close bond that they shared allowed her to read her Shikigami's hidden sour disposition.

"I trust our guests didn't caused you any trouble?" she asked.

Ran shook her head and bowed ever so slightly. "Not at this time, my lady."

"Good. Well then, we haven't a moment to lose. I will not let this opportunity pass me by."

A pair of red ribbons appeared out of thin air and scissored out a hole into another, much more disturbing plain of existence before widening it large enough for human sized beings to comfortably pass through. It almost perfectly resembled a disembodied eye opening up since one of the first things that the assembled company noticed was one of those hovering, spectral eyeballs. As the boundary was opening, the silky whiteness made the gap itself look like one slowly opening eyeball.

Letty squeezed her eyes closed as she remembered the nightmarish plunge into the unknown, that harrowing memory that would never leave her mind. Cirno shook her head forlornly and looked down at the ground in a sulk while hoping against fate that she wouldn't have to take a trip inside the portal again. Flandre winced like someone had just pinched her cheek.

Yukari clapped her hands. "Hey, what's with this negative atmosphere all of a sudden? You were all unharmed in coming here, yes? You can trust me, I promise, but that's enough pleasantries. Flandre, we cannot let this opportunity escape us."

Yukari stepped forwards and handed Flandre the sunstone. She had to lean downwards a little to accomplish this, which only emphasized the height difference between the two. Her piecing, purple gaze bored into the back of Flandre's skull. While they were a hairs breath away from each other, the Youkai of boundaries was able to whisper

without anyone else hearing. Warm breath brushed up against Flandre's exposed neck.

"You understand how important this is, right?"

Flandre gritted her teeth. "Yes. I'll said I'll do it so it's already done."

Yukari seemed quite satisfied with that answer and indicated the rippling portal with a single wave of the hand.

"Everyone, inside the boundary, immediately. Anyone who wishes to stay here for eternity can remain as this will be your only chance to leave this place. Make sure you don't waste it. Now, who will be first?"

Yuyuko waved at Flandre and violated her personal space by walking uncomfortably close to where she was standing. She leered over Flandre like the vampire was a sweet piece of candy just begging to be eaten.

"I'm to act as your anchor to the void," she said, her tone as whimsical as ever. "Quickly now. Wrap your arms around my waist or you'll lose the opportunity to pay your debt. And then..."

Flandre hesitated but the sword hanging over her head was enough of a motivator to override her better judgement. She gave Yuyuko a funny look before clasping her arms around the lady's waist. A pleasant, soothing scent washed over Flandre. She couldn't quite place the peculiar perfume that Yuyuko used but it made her feel lightheaded and strangely melancholy. Her beating chest bobbed up against Flandre's ear which sung to her like a lullaby. She was colder than a living being should be but still held enough warmth to imitate a mother's affection.

Yuyuko giggled like a gambler who had just won the jackpot as she coddled Flandre with great delight. She let her hands swim across the nightwalker's back and lightly tingled a few of the crystals that hung from Flandre's wings like diamond shaped fruits which caused

Flandre to squeeze her mouth together in soundless pleas. It was when Yuyuko began to nestle up her face against her captive's that the spell was finally undone and Flandre regained her senses. She yelped and shoved Yuyuko away while clutching her arms tightly around her like a ward against evil.

Flandre's face was blushing the deepest shade of red it had ever been in her long life and her fingers were almost clawing at themselves to scrub away the taint. Her chest was heaving as if she had just ran several marathons back to back. She pointed a shaking finger at the smiling Yuyuko who looked very satisfied with herself. She still looked at Flandre with something bordering on affection.

"Y-you!" Flandre accused. "What do you t-think your doing? You lied to me, didn't you? You just wanted to touch me again!"

Yuyuko held up her hands apologetically. Cirno frowned and wondered why Flandre couldn't just let herself enjoy a loving hug. Letty sensed impending trouble and instinctively shuffled towards the nearest flowerbed. Yukari breathed an impatient sigh and glanced at her friend sternly while shaking her head. She couldn't quite hide the smile that had formed along the corners of her lips but business was business and she didn't have time to indulge her friend's mischief at this pressing time.

The portal in front of them disappeared only to be replaced by three separate, dark boundaries that swallowed up Flandre, Cirno and Letty and pulled them into the nightmarish state of flux that existed within Yukari's twisted realm. There was no time for screams or struggles. The last thing that Flandre saw was the night's sky and full moon looking down at her from the garden's open ceiling.

# Bamboozled

The cold, oppressive nothingness completely surrounded Flandre like a second skin made of shadows. Inside Yukari's strange realm, up and down ceased to hold any real meaning and losing your bearings was commonplace. Flandre didn't even know which way she was falling or if indeed she was falling at all. The whole ordeal of trying to make sense of this dimension made her head spin. Maybe some malevolent force was pulling at her from above?

*Or maybe I'm in the magical belly of some creature beyond the vale?  
No, stop thinking like that. Don't be so weak minded.*

Flandre tried to imagine that she was at home opening presents on Christmas day which was one of her favorite times of the year. That warm, fuzzy thought served as a barrier to all the mental horrors. Remilia would be happily looking on as Flandre ripped opened the beautiful gift wrapping with a beaming smile.

Sakuya would be acting awkwardly outside of her usual regimented routine. Meiling would be humming along merrily and would hoist Flandre atop her shoulders so that she could feel tall and important and tower over the fairy maids. Patchouli, having been drawn away from the library by the promise of a new book would be entertaining everyone with dazzling displays of magic and wonders. All from the comfort of the nearest padded chair of course.

Flandre was glad that they retained some customs from the human world as seeing everyone at the mansion come together for that one single moment was priceless and made Flandre feel like she was still part of a real, extended family. She wasn't very skilled with her hands but always made the effort and tried to make a splendid homemade gift for her beloved sister. Remilia always accepted it graciously even thought the end result was usually less than spectacular.

Giant eyeballs followed the vampire's progress as they shifted along the invisible currents that flowed around everything like a river made up of black energy. Her dress was flapping wildly around her legs but only the sound of Flandre's own beating heart kept her company in the endless void. Sound was not a concept that bothered this place, nor was the sense of smell. None of that bothered Flandre however as she was lost in her pleasant memories.

Time passed and before Flandre knew what had hit her, she emerged back into the material realm. Flandre had just enough time to gasp before she hit the ground with a thud. Thankfully her instincts were still sharp enough for her to outstretch her arms which at least saved her from eating a face full of earth. She grunted and pushed herself to her feet while dusting off her dress with quick, annoyed strokes.

*That damned gap Youkai!*

Flandre wasn't exactly sure how the dimensional portals worked but she was pretty sure that her trickster acquaintance could have avoided depositing her from a vertical drop.

*But no, that would have been far too damn convenient for that conniving old maid!*

A likewise thud behind Flandre announced Cirno's terminal appearance. The fairy had howled and waved her arms in the air, not having the time or peace of mind to remember that she could fly. It wasn't a long fall, more like a few steps down a staircase but it was enough to knock the wind out of your sails. Cirno scrambled to her feet and angrily smacked one of the nearby bamboo stems.

Tall, green bamboo stalks extended themselves out of the ground all around Flandre like a series of tent posts that served no purpose. Green leaves branched off all along their length. They were packed so tightly together that they would have blotted out most of the sunlight had it not been night. There was the occasional tree but they

were thin, dainty things that looked like they couldn't stand up to a stiff breeze.

As it stood, pale beams of moonlight squeezed between the ribbed polls like a fragmenting spectrum of only a single shade of white. It looked like the heavens had opened up and was inviting them in only for the way to be barred by a living prison of bamboo.

What a strange mockery of a forest thought Flandre who had only ever witnessed the traditional picture of a forest that was full of trees and bushes. It smelled strongly of crushed pine cones. This place might as well have been a different planet as far as the vampire was concerned.

Insects could be heard chirping as they took advantage of the night's protection. The grass underfoot was sparser than normal but was taller and much more abrasive. Flandre walked over to her fairy companion and winced more than a few times as it brushed up against her bare and exposed thighs like the cruel barbs of a cat and nine tails.

"Stupid, stupid gap demon!" Cirno exclaimed, her voice breaking the exotic spell of this foreign environment.

"Yeah," Flandre agree. "That old maid is just flaunting her power. Looking down on us, well, we'll show her what we're capable of."

"That's right," Cirno said smugly. "We're the strongest duo in Gensokyo. We'll ace this mission like it was nothing and then turn those annoying demons into frozen popsicles!"

The icy fairy looked around her, suddenly a little uncertain. "Hey, where's Letty?"

"I'm over here," came a whimsical voice that was decidedly not Letty's calming tone from between a series of broken and snapped shafts of bamboo.



Flandre shuddered inwardly. It shouldn't have surprised her that the annoying and possessive princess of the dead was still hanging around like an unwelcome visitor that wouldn't just get the not so friendly hint and go away. Flandre fought down the tempting urge to either fly away as fast as her wings would carry her or blast Yuyuko into her component pieces. Instead she just sighed and resigned herself to the inevitable.

"What are you doing here? You're not Letty," asked Cirno incredulously who seemed just as displeased as Flandre at Yuyuko's appearance and that was even without her friend's prior knowledge.

"What have you done with Letty?"

"Someone has to make sure that you keep your focus," replied Yuyuko. She chuckled and glanced at Flandre. "Too many cooks spoil the broth. We graciously decided to allow you to keep your fairy maid since you seem so enamored with her but I'll be accompanying you from now on until you complete your task."

She reluctantly returned her attention to Cirno. "Letty was safely released somewhere in the fairy forest. Please, stop your senseless worrying."

"I'm not a fairy maid!" yelled Cirno. "Why does everyone call me a maid all the time. Fairies can be far more than stupid maids you know. I'm living proof! I've battled the shrine maiden as well, so stop turning your nose up at me! We're not in your horrible dimension anymore so we have no reason to listen to your orders! Right, Flandre?"

Cirno looked over hopefully at her friend for support which caused Flandre to nibble nervously at her lip. She couldn't just abandon this mission thanks to the threat of blackmail but on the other hand she couldn't divulge the real reason that she was dancing to Yukari's strings. The risk was just too great but doubts had started to emerge within Flandre's heart. Perhaps she should just trust Cirno to keep her identity a secret. After all, isn't that what friends were for?

*No, I cannot trust her with something so important. She would just babble it out at the earliest opportunity.*

Yuyuko looked bored of the fairy's pestering and glanced at Flandre expectantly. The two opposing forces watching her made her feel very uncomfortable and in the end she decided to just pass it off and hope that Cirno didn't read too much into it.

"Lets just get this over with," Flandre said while looking at nothing in particular.

"Good," said Yuyuko as she indicated a clearing in the bamboo. Her robe-like dress flapped loosely around her pointing arm.

"Lets go then, shall we? I can feel the presence. It's very close."

She started to carefully work herself between the natural spears while taking great care not to trip up on the forest floor which was littered with fallen bamboo and hard patches of densely packed grass. Her blue flowery robe was clearly not the best choice of attire for such a wild and closely packed environment.

Flandre clutched the cloth covered sunstone tightly in her hand as Cirno seemed confused and dejected at her friend's compliance. The fairy wandered over and peered at Flandre like a doctor examining a sick patient. Her icy wings flickering with interest.

"Hey, is something wrong with you?" she asked in a hushed tone. Well, hushed for Cirno's standards at least.

"Nothing's wrong with me, I-" Flandre hesitated. "The sooner we do this, the sooner we'll be finished."

When she noticed Cirno's skeptical look she leaned in and lowered her voice to the merest of whispers. Cirno flinched uncertainly despite her familiarity with the vampire. Sometimes vampires were just plain intimidating no matter how well you knew them.

"I have a plan. We'll play along for now. Just trust me."

*I just hope I think of one soon.*

They followed Yuyuko through the bamboo forest, the smell of woodland heavy in the air. It was slow going as the princess of the dead was clearly the pampered, spoiled mistress that she appeared to be and was quite content to move at her own refined pace.

The pleasing scent reminded Flandre of herbal tea but she resisted the urge to sniff the flesh cluster of plants. For all she knew they were poisoned and attracted prey with that deceptively attractive aroma. It wouldn't have been the first time.

Yuyuko at least appeared to know where she was going and didn't seem at all hindered by the lack of light. Maybe the faint beams of moonlight were enough for her eyes or maybe she simply sensed the spirits of living beings to help guide her.

It occurred to Flandre that she had never really questioned how Cirno could see in the dark, since it came so naturally to a vampire. She just took it for granted. Letty needed her floating, purple crystal to aid her sight so Flandre supposed that it varied wildly from being to magical being.

Cirno had more of a spring in her step and looked much more like her cheery, carefree self since Flandre had lied about her supposed plan.

*Well, if it keeps her happy...*

The tall shafts of bamboo loomed over the little ice fairy like the discarded toothpicks of a giant. She looked up at them in childish wonder with gasps of amazement. There was no talking as the party of three navigated themselves through the living maze.

Yuyuko's unnerving presence stifled out any conversation like she could somehow strangle the very concept out of existence. Flandre

sometimes envied Cirno's naivety. The vampire stared at the back of Yuyuko's neck and licked the sharp fangs inside her mouth. She wondered at the sheer arrogance of exposing one's blindside. Misplaced confidence or utter certainty? It irked Flandre whatever the reason.

"Cirno, was it?" asked Yuyuko as she lead the way. The luscious vegetation parted before her like the curtains before a performance as transparent white orbs cleared the way for their master.

"I never did ask why you follow Flandre in such a dangerous endeavor. What are you hoping for? What have you been promised?"

Cirno blinked and looked surprised and somewhat wary that Yuyuko was taking the time to talk to her. Flandre frowned and wondered what gambit this was leading to as innocent curiosity was simply not in Yuyuko's vocabulary.

"I haven't been promised anything. I follow Flandre because I enjoy it and more importantly, it's fun. Why are you trying so hard to scare someone as brave as me?"

"Oh," Yuyuko wondered. "I would have figured that you would have been promised some kind of reward. I mean, why else would you put yourself at such risk? Considering the obvious power disparity, it seems to me that you are little more than an assistant, a sideshow. Why pretend otherwise?"

Flandre felt anger rise up inside her chest like the fiery breath of a dragon as she heard the relish in Yuyuko's voice as she attempted to twist Flandre's only friend outside the mansion against her. Cirno's cheerful expression didn't disappear entirely but definitely became more strained. She wrinkled her nose uncertainly.

"Why would I believe anything you say? Flandre is my friend, not you. You're just jealous and bitter that you're not included in our adventure. That's why you came along with us, isn't it?"

Flandre was honestly impressed with the fairy's resolute answer and was only a little embarrassed when her heart fluttered at the earnest mention of their friendship.

Yuyuko chuckled. "What an interesting answer. It's amusing when I see such selective memory. Where was your precious friend when you were captured? What important task could have kept her away when her dearest friend was in need? Why, she was busy denying me that pointless trinket. The very thought of losing something shiny and potentially valuable was more important than your safety. Tell me, is that the action of a friend?"

Flandre snarled and could no longer stand by in silence while this pointless slander continued.

"That's a lie and you know it since you gave me no choice in the matter. Besides, sending you to the afterlife was the best way to help Cirno. It's just a pity that you didn't stay there."

"Now, now," tutted Yuyuko. "Let's not say something we might regret. I was just curious."

Flandre and Cirno exchanged a look but said nothing else on the matter. Yuyuko was obviously just trying to amuse herself in the downtime between action and didn't care how many feelings she trampled on in order to achieve it. Cirno just contented herself by punching the air behind the princess' back while imagining various scenarios involving a giant snowball and Yuyuko running down a frosty hillside in terror.

The forest of bamboo was lighted up by shimmering glowflys that danced around the air in trails of yellow light. They maneuvered and circled around each other and in doing so, they created vivid, strobing patterns that left an afterimage that disappeared after a few fleeting seconds. The scent of this place was almost like a natural remedy and lulled you into a relaxing state the longer you remained here. Flandre sniffed in a refreshing whiff and smiled at the pleasant aroma.

It was almost like a greenhouse with the canopy of green leaves and tall shafts of bamboo that stretched all around you. Flandre wondered just how far away she was from the mansion. She could be on the other side of Gensokyo for all she knew.

Certainly, this place resembled nothing from her memories. She started to worry about how she was planning to find her way back before daybreak. While travelling under the burning sun wasn't an impossibility for her, she would be incredibly weakened and it would make infiltrating the mansion significantly more troublesome.

Flandre blinked as she noticed a strange looking vine hanging from a tree branch. It was rope and completely none magical which would explain why not one else had noticed it. It had been camouflaged with leaves and other foliage. Yuyuko was still leading the way and her course would take her directly over it. Flandre sneered with delight. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for her to yell out a warning and yet she held her tongue.

She felt like a scientist watching an experiment as Yuyuko took another innocent, delicate step right on top of the contraption and yelped as she was immediately strung up and hurled into the air as the rope constricted around her ankles.

She dangled from the tree like a pinata. Her immaculate blue robe hung around her waste and fell around her head which exposed her creamy thighs and white satin panties. Her muffled, confused moans were quite unladylike for one such as herself.

*It couldn't have happened to a more deserving person.*

Flandre was tempted to pick up some bamboo and start beating her with it until candy showered the ground. Cirno held a hand over her mouth to unsuccessfully stifle an outburst of giggling that rocked her tiny body and almost made her double over from the force of it. Yuyuko drifted from side to side like a pendulum as she clumsily struggled to free herself. Her white spirit orbs angrily buzzed around

the rope like hornets but found themselves unable to effect something that wasn't a living thing.

"Don't just stand there," Yuyuko barked. "Help me!"

Flandre sniggered and savored the moment a little longer before she sighed and aimed her finger at the offending tree trunk. It twisted, curled and finally snapped as its component atoms were blasted out of existence. Yuyuko shrieked and hit the forest floor with a thud, the soft grass doing little to cushion her fall. With as much dignity as she could manage, which wasn't much under the circumstances, Yuyuko picked herself up while dusting off her ruffled clothing.

She glowered at Flandre like she was somehow responsible, huffed in a strop and whirled around to continue the journey. Her dark expression suggested that any further laughter at her expense wouldn't be the best idea and the two onlookers tried their best to hide their amusement with various levels of success.

Laughter aside, Flandre made sure to keep a more watchful eye for any further traps. The tripwire had been a primitive but effective means at capturing someone since no one in their right mind would have suspected a none magical trap in Gensokyo where it was far more commonplace to encounter destructive charms and wards. Her eyes penetrated the darkness and spotted a concealed pitfall which she skillfully avoided.

"Ho, ho, ho," came a chuckle from inside the forest. "Nicely avoided."

Flandre spun around in the direction of the voice and spotted a pair of bunny ears protruding from behind a rather large shaft of bamboo. She saw a flash of movement, a blur of pink fabric as the being darted between cover which shielded her from view. Flandre only caught a glimpse before losing track completely. She heard a lurch behind her as something strained and groaned on ropes that barely contained something weighty.

Cirno gasped as a swinging hammer came barreling out of the gloom. It was made from a wooden log and smashed itself through several shafts of bamboo on its quest to flatten the icy fairy into a pancake. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled up in panic and she summoned up a deathly cold winter mist which covered up the trunk in an icy shell. It glittered like a giant flying stalactite.

Unfortunately, with all the added weight the rope snapped and caused it to smash into the earth but not before uprooting several spears of bamboo that all fell in random directions.

They creaked like an overloaded staircase and the multiple impacts sheered through the fairy's nerve. The hammer shattered into thousands of frozen shards. None of them came remotely near Cirno but fear drove her to the ground in any case. She grumbled at having scuffled her arms for nothing.

"Lunarians," Yuyuko scoffed like the word alone was insult enough.

"You look older and older every time I see you, Yuyuko," came the high pitched voice that almost sounded like a child if not for the sense of hidden wisdom contained within. The voice came from a stealthy location. Flandre could follow the direction of the voice but could see nothing resembling a living being.

Yuyuko seemed to stare knowingly off into the distance. Flandre could see nothing in that direction and assumed that her clingy acquaintance must be sensing a presence in the spiritual realm rather than relying on her naked eyesight.

It reminded her of the Cheshire cat from Alice in wonderland. That had always been one of Flandre's favorite bedtime stories and her current situation mirrored the book in many ways.

"Hold your tongue, Tewi," spat Yuyuko. "That's you, isn't it? Only you would dabble in such ridiculous and childish traps."



Tewi laughed, the sound rebounding off the tall bamboo to create the illusion that they were surrounded. "I'm sorry the tripwire was too childish for your refined tastes to notice. Maybe you should watch where you're going next time, old lady Yuyuko."

Yuyuko curled her lip into a twisted scowl. If her face turned even more sour it could easily melt paint.

"Stay out of my business, exile," she spat, her voice holding none of its usual, whimsical charm.

"Stay out of my home? Don't be silly. I'll be telling the princess of your arrival and I doubt that she'll be too pleased when she hears the news. Maybe you should make yourself scare, miss wondering corpse."

Flandre shifted her feet on the spot in irritation. It hurt her pride to not be able to track a beings location in the night which was by all accounts her own domain.

Without warning, Yuyuko willed into existence those menacing, ethereal scissors which she clasped rather loosely in her shaking hands. She used those to cut a large swath through the bamboo as if she were a barber trimming down a forest of hair. They crashed to the ground in rapid succession, having been reduced to pieces.

Seemingly unsatisfied, she snapped the giant jaws shut yet again and sliced and diced anything within her field of vision. In that one moment, Yuyuko looked unhinged and was overcome with some emotion that approached anger though her ladylike sensibilities wouldn't let her express it openly.

"Don't take your anger out on the forest!" Cirno exclaimed as she watched hundreds of year worth of nature chopped up and diced in an instant.

"Oh, be quite," Yuyuko snapped. "I'm not in the mood for any backchat."

She looked at the jagged and mangled remains of the bamboo sticking out of the earth and was silent for a moment. Green sap dribbled down their lengths like blood. It smelled strongly of a freshly cut lawn but looked like a full force hurricane had been unleashed upon it. She glanced at Flandre, her expression unusually serious.

"I'm going after that trickster. Nobody laughs at me and gets away with it. Particularly if that someone is a retched Lunarian. You can take your fairy friend and head in that direction."

She indicated with a flippant wave of the hand.

"Alyssia is right over there so make haste. Don't forget your mission. Lose the sunstone to her in a convincing fashion otherwise you know very well what will happen."

Flandre felt like she had been slapped across the face and wanted nothing more than to throw those condescending orders back at Yuyuko's haughty, holier than thou face but Yuyuko had already left to chase down Tewi and reclaim her honor. Maybe it was for the best. She probably wouldn't have said anything anyway, she wasn't stupid and hadn't forgotten the blackmail. Indeed, she had a very good memory and held grudges like cherished possessions.

Cirno looked uncertainly at Flandre as she eagerly awaited her friend to take the lead. Flandre shook her head and hovered off the air which sent a faint ripple through the grass. Cirno likewise lifted upwards with icy sparkles and prepared to follow however a thundering concussion shook the bamboo forest before the pair could get underway. Several of the weakened poles took this as their cue to finally collapse and give up the will to hold themselves together.

Flandre and Cirno both exchanged worried and somewhat curious glances. That explosion or whatever it had been had originated from the direction that Yuyuko had indicated. They nodded to each other and at an unspoken agreement, they both flew as fast as they could

managed through the densely packed forest. At least two more impacts sounded out like an artillery barrage.

It didn't take them long to reach the epicenter of all the ruckus. Two figures stood facing each other in a clearing that was anything but natural. The surround foliage had been reduced to smoldering ash and the bamboo looked more like used matchsticks. Black smoke hung heavy in the air and still raging fires illuminated the surrounding area.

"No matter how many times I kill you, Kaguya, I never grow tired of it," said the grey haired girl.

She was tall, somewhat unkempt and held an unforgiving and rough aura about her. Red and white charms were tied in her long hair, much like Yukari's ribbons. While her hair was grey, it held a luster to it that appeared almost white but not quite. She wore a simple, partially unbuttoned shirt and red trousers that were also decorated with mystical charms. The most striking thing about her was the constant fire that leaped from her like she was the sun of her own universe.

Kaguya had an air of refinement about her and held herself with the grace and confidence that usually accompanied a rich daughter or someone of royalty. Her dress was a deep red silk that looked incredibly expensive. She was blessed with immaculately long, black hair. Her blouse was pink with a white bow tied around the collar. Both were richly embroidered with flowery designs.

In her slender, pale hand was a wand that looked very much like a small branch. Each tip bore a different, glowing colour and she held it with authority as she waved it dismissively at Mokou like the merest acknowledgement was somehow beneath her station.

"You're lucky that I even grace you with my presence," said Kaguya. She tilted her head to the side as she spoke, like she was examining an insect.

"I feel dirty even inhaling the same air as you, Mokou. Kindly stop breathing and die."

Mokou screamed her opponents name with pure hatred as spittle flew from her lips. She flung herself recklessly forwards like a speeding bullet on trails of flames like the wings of a legendary phoenix. The princess giggled with a wide smile, her voice and happy expression suggesting that she was enjoying immensely all this malice directed at her like a singer drinking in the loud adoration of her excited fans.

"So direct and graceless," Kaguya said with a mocking grin. "Even your fighting style reeks of a commoners blood."

Kaguya's hands moved with a grace that only years of practiced and forced education could have produced. She swatted away the burning fireballs that came her way like they were mere illusions and fired her own volley back at the flying white haired berserker. The projectiles were each a different colour of the rainbow and beautiful in the way that they glowed and pulsed with life.

They slammed into the raging inferno that threatened to engulf Mokou herself, such was the intensity of her passionate enmity. Her flame burned briefly with each of the colours that she absorbed in turn which created a furious firestorm that would have rivaled the mightiest fireworks display.

Kaguya never stopped smiling even in the face of this seemingly unstoppable force and held her arms out as if to embrace her bitter enemy. Her twisted wand was glowing with increased power and she held it closely at her side. Fire met light as the two opposing forces collided in a tempest of orange colour.

Flandre could tell that Kaguya could have avoided it if she had wanted to but she seemed to actively look forward to the coming bloodbath with real relish on her polished, painted lips. Mokou yelled an earsplitting howl as she reached her quarry, wound back her fist

and launched at at Kaguya who was driven back by the overwhelming ferocity of the assault.

The pair became a blazing inferno, the surrounding grass and bamboo was incinerated by the glowing onslaught. The earth shook and rumbled like a hungry stomach.

They stabbed, punched and clawed at each other while occasionally throwing out a punch or energy blast. Kaguya raked her long and slender nails across her opponents eyes while Mokou grabbed Kaguya by her long, beautiful black hair and yanked some of it out by the roots.

Flandre winced as she smelled the sickening scent of cooked flesh and Cirno pulled at her dress in an attempt to get the vampire's attention. She had no desire to watch this savage display any further but Flandre was transfixed, like rational thought had completely left her mind.

The sheer viciousness of the fight was certainly something that needed to be witnessed firsthand to believe. They fought each other tooth and nail, literally. They took none of the usual precautions to avoid serious injury and already their clothes were slick with blood from various wounds.

While the pleasing scent of lifeblood exited Flandre the first thing she noticed was the complete lack of cuts and bruises. The combatants should have been covered in lacerations and minor injuries from the deadly duel but only their clothing seemed to suffer the effects.

The princess' garb was blackened and the sleeves had been sheered away by the flames. In fact, her dress was still on fire in a few places however that flame was eclipsed by the all encompassing fire that roared around them. Such intense heat would have sheered the lungs and made breathing impossible but it didn't seem to slow either of them down.

Cirno had long since averted her eyes and had clasped both hands around her ears so that the shouting and pained screams wouldn't bother her anymore. Flandre still stared at the duel in morbid fascination as she admired the savage charm.

A freezing hand against her leg snapped Flandre back into reality and she glared down at Cirno who was indicating that they should move on. At least Flandre assumed that's what all the aimless hand gestures and pointing meant. A stray attack immolated a patch of flowers on the other side of the clearing.

Flandre gulped and finally allowed the fairy to lead her away from the spectacle. They worked themselves around the disaster area while keeping a healthy distance between them and the occasional patch of blazing forest and spilled out from the clearing. Flandre wiped the sweat from her forehead. It was sweltering like a hot summers day. Cirno seemed to lack energy and her shoulders were slumped like she had just dropped her ice cream.

Thankfully they made it safely around the clearing without becoming collateral damage. Flandre glanced behind her and was glad that Cirno was still alive and well and hadn't melted into a pile of icy slush. The vampire just had enough time to imagine trying to revive her friend by gathering up the melted water and stuffing it into the nearest freezer before she found what she was looking for.

Alyssia had been tied to the ground with strong looking rope. The pure white wings on her back were stretched out on the forest floor and a few of the fluffy feathers fluttered around in the air. She strained to look up at the figure talking to her but couldn't move her neck more than a few inches.

Someone in a mixture between a dress and a nurses uniform was standing over her with a deadly looking syringe in one hand. She depressed the end and a glowing, neon green liquid spurted out from the tip. Alyssia's face visibly paled as the noxious fluid bubbled on the earth in front of her.

"Now, let's try this again," the nurse calmly asked her captive.

"What were you doing here exactly?"

# Moonlight

Both Flandre and Cirno observed the curious scene in front of them as they cautiously peered out from behind shafts of bamboo. Thankfully their target was still alive and well, at least for the time being, however that could change at any moment.

The serene, angel-like Alyssia had been tied to the ground in a most cruel and uncomfortable looking way while she was interrogated by a unsympathetic looking, silver-gray haired nurse. At least Flandre assumed that she was a nurse or somehow linked with medicine. She certainly looked harsh enough to give people second thoughts from ever setting foot inside a doctors practice.

The interrogator wore a frilly dress that was the darkest blue on one side and the brightest red on the other while the colour scheme was reversed above her waste. What looked like star constellations were stitched across the fabric and she wore a hat decorated with a red medical cross in the same fashion as her dress. In her hand, she held a syringe which she dangled threateningly above her helpless captive.

Alyssia's eyes widened and she struggled against her restraints but the ropes held firm. Her skin had deep red marks from the constant friction burns that the tightly tied binds so generously provided.

"Keep that stuff away from me!" she demanded as she attempted to defiantly glare at her captor. "I promise you'll regret this! I take orders from the eminent Isabelle Paleflower. Release me at once if you have any sense within you."

The nurse smiled entirely without humor. "Now, there's a good girl. I've never heard of Isabelle Paleflower. If she were so important, I wouldn't need to ask, now would I? Now, why don't you tell me more about why we caught you sneaking around our manor's grounds, hmm?"



"I," Alyssia paused. "I was just looking for support in our holy mission. I seek audience with the exiled princess, Kaguya Houraisan."

"Oh?" inquired the nurse as she ran a loving finger along the length of the syringe. "You certainly have a strange way of doing things; sneaking around our grounds while seeking an audience? Why don't you tell me what you were really after, otherwise I'll give you the gracious opportunity to participate in a little experiment."

Flandre tensed up as she watched the thin needle lower ever so slowly towards Alyssia's defenseless skin. The winged being appealed to her captor's sense of mercy and when that didn't work she threw out various threats of things to come but none of that seemed to phase the almost inevitable decent of the syringe. The nurse smirked at the panicked reaction that she had caused and tutted disapprovingly as she slowly crouched down beside her unwilling test subject. Alyssia yelped as the cool metal needle was tapped against her soft cheek.

As Flandre watched the scene unfold from behind her hiding place, she felt Cirno anxiously tugging against her dress. The message was clear; they needed to act and soon if they had any intention whatsoever of making sure that Alyssia didn't end up drugged to high heaven on some mad scientist's depraved dream. Flandre nodded back at her fairy friend and whispered that they would act as soon as she decided on the correct course of action.

She listened silently for a moment and sniffed the forest's air. The refreshing, almost soothing smell of bamboo was still ever present but the thing that gave her pause was the increased strength of that strong charcoal stench of burning clothing and vegetation.

Something was approaching, she could hear multiple sets of footsteps now as they crushed the swaying grass underfoot. Flandre held a restraining hand against Cirno and gently squeezed her companion's arm without even realizing it. Cirno squirmed

uncomfortably but before she could object, two familiar figures pushed themselves through the tall grass and out into the clearing.

"Please, my lady," pleaded a bunny eared Youkai who carried a neatly pressed change of clothing in her outstretched hands. Flandre recognized her and her desperate expression as Reisen; the medicine seller. Cirno came to the same conclusion and gasped but Flandre increased the pressure on her arm before she could blurt out her groundbreaking discovery for all to hear.

"Oh, be silent," said Kaguya. "I'll change later, so stop bothering me."

The princess' garb was damaged from the vicious duel and hung around her pale white body on strands of thread. It was surely beautiful once but now what little remained of it had been torn to pieces and was stained with blood. Parts of it still smoldered with the old embers of fire, like a distant memory of the battle that had produced them. Despite this disheveled appearance, Kaguya confidently strode into the clearing like she owned the place while ignoring the pleas from her attendant to show a little more modesty.

"Please put these clothes on, Princess," said Reisen.

"Silence," said Kaguya as she waved dismissively. "I'll change later so stop hounding me. Besides, does my body offend you so?"

The nurse sighed and reluctantly withdrew the syringe from her trembling captive. She looked into the gleaming glass tube wistfully for a lingering moment before giving a curt bow to Kaguya.

"Greetings Princess," she said. "You should listen to Reisen, my Princess. That appearance is most unbecoming for one such as yourself."

"Not you as well, Eirin," said Kaguya before slowly shaking her head. "And I was so looking forward to hearing all the wonderful things that you could tell me about our mystery guest here."

Kaguya approached the tied down minion of Isabelle and circled around so that she could examine her from all angles. The lunar exile held a hand over her mouth as she did so and her judgmental gaze traveled across every visible feature like she was somehow deciding this being's fate with a simple glance. Flandre suspected that might not be too far removed from the truth.

She ducked back behind the bamboo shaft and started to whisper something in Cirno's ear. Whatever the fairy was being told caused her to scowl but Flandre wouldn't be denied and applied a little charm and praise to convince Cirno that this was the best course of action. Her bright blue eyes lighted up with the flattery and she couldn't help but get caught up in the moment. Flandre nodded and with great care and poise, she started to circle around the clearing. Through the vegetation and bamboo she traveled with the presence of a ghost.

"Apparently she wanted an audience with you, Princess," remarked Eirin.

"Is that so? Well, she has a strange way of going about things."

Kaguya clapped her hands together. Alyssia whimpered and once again strained to look up but found that she could only gaze at the princess' exposed thighs. It was especially unnerving because she couldn't even see whether the person taking to her was displeased or just plain sadistic. "Well? What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I bring word from my master," blurted out Alyssia a little too quickly. "We want your help to escape this false reality called Gensokyo and return to our rightful place in the world. Please, help us tear down these invisible walls that bind us."

Kaguya reached down and stroked a soothing hand across one of Alyssia's fluffy white wings which caused the bound woman to flinch at the unexpected touch. Kaguya smirked and suddenly and without warning, she neatly plucked out a single feather. Alyssia gasped at the sudden pain and started to frantically struggled against her

bonds. She felt surrounded and trapped. All these unfamiliar voices around her that could be planning the most unspeakable deeds to subject her to and she was utterly powerless to resist.

"Don't lie to me," whispered Kaguya right into her ear as she toyed with the feather between her nimble fingers. "We were observing you for quite some time with no small amount of amusement. Did you really think such a poor attempt to infiltrate my home would go unnoticed? Such a clumsy being for one blessed with such a beautiful, angelic form. It would be such a tragedy if something were to happen to you. Eirin? Perhaps you should give her a shot, for her own wellbeing of course."

Eirin nodded happily, her impassive face turning into a smile at the chance to test out her newest creation. She crouched down and tapped the syringe in the way that a professional health care worker might but her intentions couldn't have been more different from the traditional mantra of saving lives. Alyssia squealed loudly and redoubled her efforts to struggle herself free but only succeeded in further tightening the hard robe against her skin.

Flandre watched the scene unfold from her new hiding place within the tall grass. She nibbled at her lip impatiently while she waited for Cirno to get her act together. She couldn't help but fidget as boundless energy coursed throughout her in anticipation of imminent action.

*Come on! What's taking so long?*

Behind her, crackling fires still burned strongly from the now forgotten duel between Kaguya and Mokou. Flandre hoped that the pungent scent would help mask her presence just on the off chance that one of her potential adversaries possessed animal like senses. The occasional crackling of flames as they devoured more of the forest was relaxing in a way and helped Flandre find a hidden reserve of patience. It reminded her of an open fireplace.

After a while, Cirno let out a deep breath and took her first uncertain steps out into the clearing. In typical ice fairy fashion, she couldn't help but overact and stumbled out while brushing away a bushy branch that didn't even come close to baring her way. Instantly, she felt the weight of three sets of piercing eyes fixated on her like she had just wandered into a predator's bone littered den. The tall, impassive bamboo shafts seemed to close in on her one by one. She tried not to swallow involuntarily.

"H-hello there," she said. "I'm a little lost. Can you help me?"

Cirno waited anxiously for a response but the only sound to grace her was the noise her own shuffling feet made against the leaf littered floor. She waited for a moment and grew increasingly annoyed at the silence. Didn't they care that she was lost was the maddening thought that raced through her mind despite the fact that she was only meant to be playacting.

"Well, why don't you say something? I need some help here! I've been lost for three straight days!"

Kaguya ran a hand absentmindedly through her long, black hair while making it a point to look elsewhere. "Someone deal with this annoying fairy," she sighed like speaking wasn't even worth the effort.

"Reisen," Eirin commanded.

Reisen nodded quickly and eagerly moved to intercept the fairy before Cirno's merest presence bothered the princess any further. She knew better than to displease Eirin, especially when Kaguya was involved. Her face flashed with a hint of recognition but if she remembered Cirno, she didn't give any indication.

"Move along, fairy. Just turn around and go back the way you came. If you keep walking, you'll surely find yourself safely outside the bamboo forest."

"But I'm hungry!" Cirno protested. "I'm too weak to take even another step."

But she could see that her weak protests were falling on deaf ears. While Reisen was firmly distracted, her other two targets didn't even seem aware of her existence. She would have to change that, lest Flandre think her some kind of idiot that cannot back up her word. Reisen's eyes sparkled with power and swirled around like two shining purple whirlpools. Cirno couldn't help but be swept up in them but before she lost herself completely, she managed to utter the words that had been forming on the tip of her tongue.

"Why won't you help me? You'll happily help that homeless girl over there, but not me?" Cirno inquired while pointing in the direction of Kaguya.

Reisen flinched, became very still and suddenly looked incredibly worried for some reason. Her hypnotizing eyes instantly lost their sparkling brilliance like someone had flipped a switch and returned them to normal. Kaguya glanced behind her and fixed the fairy with a hateful stare. Eirin likewise glowered at Cirno like she had just slapped her across the face. The atmosphere had instantly taken a turn for the worst. Cirno could tell, since history had shown that she was usually the cause of it.

"Did you just refer to me as homeless?" asked Kaguya in disbelief.

"No, I just-" Cirno began as she backed up a step.

"Silence! It's no use trying to backpedal, fairy. Obviously you have no idea who your talking to otherwise you wouldn't dare refer to me in such an unflattering way. Simply speaking to me directly is an affront to one such as myself. I've been alive for countless centuries and witnessed the birth and death of civilizations. I've seen the moon and the stars from a place higher than the heavens. Countless suitors compete for my favor. Can you still speak to me with such indignity?"

"Prostrate yourself before her in humble forgiveness," demanded Eirin. "Perhaps she'll choose to be merciful."

Cirno however looked starry eyed and didn't seem to hear anyone else other than the exiled princess of the moon. She clasped her hands together, almost as if in prayer and had a yearning expression as if she were hanging on Kakuya's every word.

"Wow, that sounds amazing. I'm sorry, this is the first time I've ever set foot outside the fairy forest. Please, could you tell me more wonderful things?"

Her voice was cheerful and innocent and seemed quite genuine. Her sweet, childish tone presented someone who was curious and easily impressed. Kaguya looked thoughtfully at the fairy, perhaps considering her in a new light.

"I'm sorry," Reisen yelped, abruptly. "I'll depose of this interloper right away."

She once again turned her bewitching, glowing purple gaze against Cirno but this time Kaguya held up a hand to restrain her attempts.

"Don't be so hasty, Reisen. Perhaps this one has some potential. Tell me, are you interested in hearing of my legend?"

Cirno smiled earnestly and nodded her head with no small amount of enthusiasm. "Yes, please tell me! All the fairy's around me always talk about the most boring stuff like collecting flowers and weaving and I couldn't stand another second of it. That's why I left the forest behind to go on adventures but I've never heard the legend of a real life princess!"

Kakuya held up a hand over her mouth and chuckled like it was nothing but she was clearly enjoying all the high praise and being at the center of attention. Eirin sighed like she had heard it all before and reluctantly nodded at Reisen to back off. She knew how self indulgent and prideful the princess could be whenever her past and

heritage was mentioned. She would happily talk about herself until sunrise if given the opportunity.

"And then I decided to grace the village with my presence at the festival," Kaguya continued as she recalled days long past. Cirno listened intently while occasionally nodded her head to indicate that she was still paying the proper amount of attention.

"To their credit, the inhabitants recognized what an honor I had bestowed upon them and were eternally grateful. So much so, that they named me the maiden from the moon and gifted me with modest riches and trinkets."

"Ah, that story," Eirin said under her breath. As she contemplated how much time this particular tale would take, she sighed and consoled herself by lovingly rubbing the syringe in her hand. She looked at the clear glass surface and saw her own happy reflection staring back at her and was surprised at how malevolent she looked. The green, bubbling liquid sloshed around inside as she turned back to her test subject but was shocked to find that the ropes had been silently cut without her knowledge.

Then she noticed a crystal winged little girl carrying her precious captive away with her with an arm wrapped around her shoulder. They disappeared behind a mass of bamboo but Eirin had seen them. She knew everything. How dare she interfere like that, Eirin thought. Didn't this foolish girl realize that she was standing in the way of progress? That she was an enemy of knowledge?

"Hey, you!" Eirin yelled. "Drop that being this instant!"

Flandre yelped and increased her pace now that she had been discovered. Alyssia had been so utterly relieved at the prospect of rescue that she hadn't made a single sound or asked any inconvenient questions but now that she was threatened with an unpleasant reunion with the operating table, she started to spasm in panic. Her large white wings thrashed about like giant pillows and



batted Flandre in the face with a soft pat which made her want to sneeze.

"I don't want to go back there! That woman is crazy!"

"Stop struggling you bird brained idiot!" snarled Flandre.

When her troublesome charge didn't get the hint, Flandre simply lost her patience and struck the back of Alyssia's head hard enough to knock her out. The light went out of her eyes and she slumped in the vampire's arms like someone had cut her strings. Not wasting any time, Flandre used her deceptively strong arms to hoist Alyssia into the air alongside her as she made her escape. As she did so, she yelled out a warning that Cirno should probably make her exit sooner rather than later.

By this point Kaguya had heard all the commotion and had come to a rather unsettling conclusion. Her story long forgotten, her face twisted into one of outrage as she glared at the fairy hatefully.

"You little maggot!" she spat, her fists trembling at her sides. "I honor you with my magnificent history and this is how you repay me?"

Cirno backed up a step and waved her hands placatingly like someone had caught her hand in the cookie jar. "I... I didn't know anything about the plan! Honest!"

"Plan?" Kaguya snarled. "Is a fool attempting to fool me? Well, whatever the case. Eirin? Remove this annoying eyesore from my sight."

Eirin abruptly stopped mid-stride which caused her immaculately polished boots to kick up some dirt. She grumbled at having to abandon the chase for the escapees but was far too professional to disobey her one and only princess. Eirin tore her thwarted gaze away from inside the bamboo forest and instead decided to take her frustrations out on the defenseless little icy fairy. Shining circles of powers appeared around her body like multiple halos of light as a

beautiful bow made of the finest wood imaginable appeared in her flexing fingers.

As Eirin began to string a luminous arrow made up of pure, bright energy, Cirno balked at the suddenly extremely hostile stares that all seemed to be directed at her and her alone. She briefly wondered why everyone had decided to pick on her and not Flandre before her flight or fight instincts kicked in and she rapidly flew away as fast as her glittering icy wings would propel her. Blue, sparkling icicles that had been produced from Cirno's wings brushed up against Kaguya and she swatted them away angrily while in the midst of a terrible temper tantrum. She violently demanded that someone do something, anything while throwing around words such as imbecile and incompetent.

The tall forest of bamboo sped past Cirno as she nimbly darted between and around them while leaving an aqua trail in her wake. Her little heart was beating frantically against her chest. It wasn't just the threat of imminent retribution that urged her on but she honestly felt a little guilty for stringing along the princess. Mostly because she had been totally engrossed in the story and had honestly been surprised as she had when Flandre had crashed the party. She ducked under an overhanging collection of hanging vines and let out a forlorn sigh.

"Awww," she moaned.

A light behind Cirno alerted her that something was following her, something fast that was rapidly approaching. She glanced behind her and saw a shaft of shimmering light snaking its way past the tall poles of bamboo as it closed the distance. It avoided any obstacles in its way like it was somehow sentient and created a bright glow that hurt the eyes. Cirno looked away and instead concentrated on increasing her speed but it seemed that the projectile not only matched her, but was gaining on her with every passing second.

Since it was now uncomfortably close, Cirno could see that the beam was actually an arrow; a magical arrow of light. She grinned and

started to do a series of steep, sudden dives and rapid changes in direction that challenged the stupid summon to keep up but keep up it did as it simply smashed through or burned whatever it couldn't curl around directly. Cirno grumbled at the conclusion that she couldn't outrun it and flipped herself around with a burst of frost so that her head was pointing towards the ground.

Like this, Cirno was facing the hurtling arrow and conjured up a stream of icy, sharp shards that shredded and froze the surrounding forest equally. Bamboo was encased in ice, shattered or otherwise sliced up by the rebounding fragments but the arrow refused to be entirely stopped by the storm. The head broke off with a flash of power and continued on its deadly path like an animal gnawing off its own trapped limb.

Flandre had circled around to meet up with her fairy friend and had arrived just in time to witness her being stuck. Flandre gasped in horror and dived down like a swooping hawk in an attempt to swat the shining arrow out of the air but she couldn't quite make it in time. Time almost seemed to slow down as her grasping hands failed to reach her friend before the shaft of light struck Cirno and violently knocked the fairy out of her flight. She gasped, a surprised look on her face as she started to free fall but Flandre was right there and snatched her up in her waiting arms.

Once safely upon the forest floor, Flandre made sure to find an overground area that they could safely shelter in. The grass was tall and surrounded them on all sides but Flandre didn't have the peace of mind to care if they were fully covered or not.

Inside, there was a stunning flowerbed made up of rich shades of purple and orange. The vampire unceremoniously dropped the unconscious Alyssia and started to rip out the flowers by the roots like she had been overcome with maddening rage at the fate that had befallen her friend. In reality, she was just desperate to make Cirno more comfortable and pulled and tore until the remains of the flowerbed had been strewn all around her. Petals drifted around the air as the wind toyed with them.

Flandre delicately laid Cirno in the center of the ravaged flowerbed and rested the fairy in her lap. It looked like a scene ripped straight from the pages of sleeping beauty. The only sound besides the fluttering grass was Cirno's own heavy breathing. She looked so small and vulnerable in her arms and Flandre shook her lightly to try and coax a reaction. Usually she was bursting at the seams with energy which made it even harder to see her in such a weakened state.

*Don't worry about that for now. I need to find the arrowhead and pull it out!*

Flandre looked for that sinister source of light that would help indicated where Cirno had been struck but couldn't find anything resembling it. That was certainly odd but she did however notice fluttering particles of light that glittered in the air like glowbugs. Flandre guessed that the shaft had dissipated after it's horrible work had been done. Instead, she gently laid the ice fairy onto the soft grass and frantically looked for the wound. It didn't take long to find it, much to her relief.

There was a thin needle sticking out of Cirno's thigh. Flandre plucked it out immediately and recoiled at the repugnant, noxious scent. It was clearly some kind of drug or poison which made sense when you considered who had fired the arrow in the first place. She sniffed it more closely and was forced to throw it away because of the strong, almost overpowering vapors. Cirno wasn't responsive at all apart from her heaving chest.

Flandre could feel Cirno's cool breath brush up against her cheeks as she listened to her fluttering heartbeat. It looked like she was suffering from some kind of deep fever. But what if it wasn't something so simple was the thought that raced through Flandre's mind. What if it was more serious then she realized? Flandre lost her patience and shook Cirno by the shoulders and even called out her name a few times but it seemed that whatever she tried failed to produce a result. She felt utterly powerless, despite the vast array of powers at her command.

*There is one thing that I can do.*

Flandre carefully sunk her fangs into the effected area around the small puncture wound. It looked like such an insignificant little pin prick, no larger than a throwing dart and yet it seemed more deadly than a fulled sized spear. As Flandre expected, Cirno's blood was lightly chilled but not freezing cold as she had feared. It reminded her of refrigerated blood that had been stored inside a fridge. It was refreshingly delectable but she wouldn't allow herself to enjoy it. For a vampire like her, it would be all too easy to fall into a state of reverie and forget her very important, true purpose.

She could taste the poison now and reminded herself that it wasn't the first time that she had been intoxicate this long night. Still, she had to fight her gap reflex just to keep on sucking. While Cirno's lifeblood tasted like a cool milkshake, the poison was tangy and putrid. Somewhere back in the far reaches of her mind, Flandre remembered the horrible taste of spoiled blood. She hadn't always lead her sheltered life.

*There's nothing to fear. Just keep at it, Flandre. You know the consequences if you do nothing.*

Flandre's eyes were beginning to water so she squeezed them shut. Her fangs were going numb and sweat was pouring down her forehead but she was determined enough to not falter. Cirno needed her and being left along again wasn't a fate that she wanted to think about. The pain and discomfort was a price worth paying ten times over. After a while, Flandre decided that taking any more blood would be dangerous and so released Cirno from her embrace. Flandre sat there for a moment as she cradled Cirno in her arms and listened to the sound of her beating chest. She desperately willed her back into consciousness.

*Please, wake up. Just talk to me. Say something!*

Flandre's vision started to blur and her head bobbed forwards as she was overcome with an overwhelming sense of tiredness. She

slumped against Cirno and mumbled her sister's name as reality started to twirl and twist around her. Her narrow red pupils widened and dilated. Sounds became both nearer and more distant and everything had an annoying echo that played havoc with her eardrums.

"That was a very brave thing you did there," said someone nearby that Flandre couldn't place.

*Cirno? Is that you?*

The vampire tried to look up but her body suddenly shook with minor convulsions. The last thing she saw was someone standing over her before she blacked out completely.

Cirno tossed and turned as she struggled in the middle of a fever dream. Her dream was a happy one at least with Letty spoiling her and her friends with affectionate hugs and cool sweets while they took shelter under a massive tree to escape the hot summer rays. She wanted another ice lolly but Letty was busy serving someone else which just wasn't right in her book. She leaned forwards and started to suck on the cold, refreshing lolly, much to the chagrin of everyone else. It didn't taste very good and she wondered if this was the subtle start of a nightmare.

"Hey!" yelled an annoyed voice. "Stop sucking my damn finger!"

Cirno woke as she was jolted from her deep sleep by a smack to the forehead which caused her to softly bite down on the horrible meat thing inside her mouth.

"Ouch!"

Another smack against her forehead, this one hard enough to set her skin prickling.

"Hey, stop smacking me you stupid oni!" Cirno mumbled as she attempted to open her flickering eyelids. It was always those stupid

creatures that tormented her dreams by stealing her belongings and acting drunk and rowdy. Her eyes had been watering which meant that the unattended moisture had hardened and formed into ice which made it painful to see. She hated it when that happened.

"I'm not a demon, so pipe down kid before I lose my temper. And don't bite me again, or I'll drop you flat on your ass."

Now that she had regained her senses somewhat, Cirno realized that she was bobbing up and down. She squinted a single aqua eye open and was rewarded with a hazy view of the bamboo forest's canopy. Moonlight still beamed down from above so she couldn't have been out for that long. Someone with a reassuringly strong grip was carrying her somewhere. But for what nefarious purpose?

"Is this a dream?" Cirno asked. "Is that you, Letty?"

"No, this is cold hard reality which is why you feel so awful. You were poisoned by that psychopathic bitch Eirin but luckily for you your bloodsucking friend gobbled up all the bad blood and saved you a nasty couple of days feeling as numb as a plank of wood. That was a brave thing she did so make sure you give her a nice big thank you from the bottom of your heart when she recovers enough to speak and listen. If you don't, I'll give you another smack, got it?"

"Who are you?" Cirno asked. "Where are you talking me?"

"I'm Mokou and please, enough with the questions already. Carrying all three of you is a massive pain in the ass so don't make me regret it."

Gradually, Cirno returned to normal little by little as her body recovered some of its feeling and the hazy mist slowly evaporated from her mind. She grumbled and contented herself to gaze up at the bamboo forest and all the relaxing ambient noises that it provided. She rested her blurry eyes and enjoyed the sensation of being cradled.

Mokou? Cirno remembered that name as the silver haired girl that was fighting against Kaguya. As she was gently bobbed around by her carrier's stride, she decided that she had recovered enough to walk on her own two feet.

"Let me down! Let me down!" Cirno exclaimed who got her wish immediately as she was dropped to the ground. She hit the grass with a thud and grunted.

"Hey, what was that for?"

"Well, you wanted to be let down, right? And my arms were growing tired."

Cirno looked around at her new surroundings. To be frank, it didn't look any different to the rest of the forest with only a few more flowerbeds and hanging vines to differentiate itself from anywhere else. Mokou bent down and carefully placed Flandre and Alyssia down on the softest patch of grass that she could find close to hand.

She felt the vampire's forehead and shook her head, her long silver hair falling around her sides as she did so. She grasped one of the red ribbons and gingerly untied it from her smooth locks before wrapping it around one of Flandre's fingers.

"This one is suffering the effects of a powerful neurotoxin that paralyzes the muscles and makes even simple actions like breathing incredibly difficult. Trust me, I know all about it. That ribbon will help things, if only a little but she'll need an antidote if she intends to do anything meaningful in the next couple of days. That poison isn't fatal, since it would ruin the moon brat's fun, but I assume that you'd rather not have her suffer, right fairy?"

Cirno nodded eagerly. "Of course! Can you help her? Can I do anything to help? Just name it!"

Mokou smiled which was slightly unnerving coming from someone like her. "Well, you just need an antidote. Simple, right? Well, the



antidote would most likely be in Eirin's workshop which will most certainly be located in Kakuya's tacky brothel of a home. The place is protected with multiple traps, most of them specifically tailored to keep me out. But if you two can get me inside, then I'll help you find the antidote. The vampire will be weak, but she'll still be conscious enough to make use of her keen senses."

"Her name is Flandre," remarked Cirno.

"Of course," replied Mokou, who scratched the back of her head and sighed. "Well, what's your name, fairy?"

"Cirno," the fairy replied while puffing out her chest to try and make herself more imposing.

"Well, Cirno, are you prepared to come with me and help Flandre?"

There was not even a possibility that Cirno would have refused.

## House of Eternity

"T-there," Flandre mumbled weakly as she pointed towards an innocent looking flower bed which contained a not so innocent pitfall.

"Nice find," replied Mokou who carefully avoided the dangerous area while Cirno carefully followed her footsteps exactly. Even though she was still under the effects of the debilitating poison, Flandre's keen vampire senses still allowed her to pick out the craftily hidden traps scattered about the bamboo forest on the approach to Kaguya's home.

After much resistance, Flandre had allowed herself to be carried in Mokou's arms like she was some kind of invalid. It hurt her pride but Cirno had insisted on it and if truth be told, Flandre was secretly thankful for the excuse.

*At least no one from the mansion will ever witness me like this; I'd rather be feared than belittled.*

Mokou had tied another one of her hair ribbons onto Flandre's golden strands which helped to sooth and smother the negative sensations flowing throughout her body and mind. Despite her looks and rather direct nature, Mokou could craft some rather intricate charms.

While her boyish clothing made her look unladylike, Mokou had a certain honesty about her which Flandre found refreshing. Too many Youkai that she had encountered tonight spoke fancy words and flashed pleasing smiles while their deeds hardly ever matched up to such false facades.

Flandre reached into her cloudy bag and drank a little blood which made her feel only slightly better. The bottle was more than half empty which both surprised and concerned her. Flandre hadn't

realized just how much she had gotten through. Hopefully she would return to the mansion before blood became a serious issue.

The traps became more creative and elaborate the longer they navigated this dangerous maze of hazards. There were poisoned spike pits, overhanging snares made from razor wire, magical landmines, snapping ethereal traps that were barely visible and various other dangers. Thankfully, Mokou's words had been true and most of them seemed to be tuned to her own particular presence instead of Flandre's and Cirno's which made searching them all out less than impossible.

Flandre mumbled a warning and pointed towards a patch of grass that was giving off an almost unnoticeable spiritual signature. It was also subtly greener and more alive than the slightly more bushy grass around it which probably meant that it was feeding off the unnatural energies that harbored within. Mokou skirted around the patch while eyeing it suspiciously just in case something decided to jump out at her. It was slow going but they made steady progress through the bamboo forest.

Cirno had to be reminded several times to stay behind Mokou and not prance around like a lunatic in such a treacherous area. The fairy had been quite vocal in her concern over Flandre and had tried to take her temperature with one of her chilly palms. Flandre didn't have the energy or the heart to protest.

She knew Cirno was displaying genuine concern over her poor condition, she couldn't help but see it in her sorrowful eyes. Finally Mokou snapped and ordered her to remain behind them before she damned them all by blundering into a waiting trap.

Flandre would have preferred to wrap herself in comforting memories and close her watering eyes but she needed to remain as sharp and alert as possible, lest she fail to clear the path. The smallest difference in smell or pitch of light was all that stood between her and any number of stealthily hidden death traps.

Whoever had designed these had obviously taken great pleasure in their construction and what fiendish things they would do to any foolhardy intruders. Drifting mist clouds began to clog the air as they slowly spread their tendrils around the bamboo shafts like a living entity coiling ever so slowly around its prey.

After a while of fighting off the urge to pass out, Flandre spotted a dark wooden structure that could only be Kaguya's residence. Grey gravel crunched underfoot as Mokou brazenly walked up the front path until only the main entrance blocked her way.

A large pair of menacing marble guard dogs flanked the path on either side and were eternally snarling at any visitors who approached but Mokou payed the lifeless objects no heed. Cirno didn't like the look of those large, currently motionless stone jaws and skipped along closer to stand inside Mokou's reassuring shadow.

The fact that she had a shadow at all in the dead of night was explained by the ominously looking pale light that radiated from the slit windows of Kaguya's residence. They looked like multiple glowing white eyes that only served to freak Cirno out even further.

The front door held a brass knocker in the shape of an elegant silver bird. Cirno reached up to grasp it and stopped herself when she realized how foolish she was acting. Her curious eyes glanced around sheepishly to see if anyone had noticed her near mistake and sighed in relief. Flandre was panting lightly and was resting her eyes now that they were no longer needed. Mokou sneered in disgust at the sight of her hated enemy's home.

Cirno blinked in surprise as the silver knocker began to open its gleaming beak, that is until Mokou clasped a firm hand around it. Within a fleeting moment, the intense heat generated by her grip caused the precious metal to bubble and melt. Cirno winced as she imagined the hot liquid silver roasting Mokou's skin but the flaming woman seemed completely unfazed. The remains of the knocker

sizzled and burned as red hot droplets of sliver dribbled down the door and began to eat into the wood.

"Was that a trap or alarm?" asked Cirno. "That thing looked alive."

"Maybe," replied Mokou. She shrugged before cautiously pushing the door open and stepping inside. Perhaps the knocker had been the locking mechanism? Well, no matter thought Cirno. No light emanated from the opening and it looked about as inviting as walking into a giant, hungry mouth. Unearthly fragrances seeped into the open air which smelled like dried flowers. Cirno gulped and took one last look behind her before following after her companions.

By this point, Flandre felt well enough to walk on her own or at least that was the lie that she had told Cirno. *A white lie*. The truth was that she couldn't have stood another second of being cradled in someone else's arms like a newborn baby. The embarrassment was almost worse than the poison and Cirno's constant coddling didn't help Flandre's self-esteem one little bit. The vampire lightly bit her lip as a disconcerting thought struck her.

*No, don't be so stubborn Flandre. You should be happy that you have such an earnest friend who cares so openly about you. Don't push this one away like all the others! Just be a little more earnest yourself.*

Mokou felt a profound disliking for this place as she stalked through it's wide hallways. She felt dirty and rubbed her forearm without even realizing it. The look of the moon was everywhere; the look that she detested. The decorations, the pictures and lighting. The angle of the walls and the curved shaping of the doors. The smell and atmosphere was utterly alien.

The most noticeable aspect of the home was that it was dark and foreboding. The only illumination was provided by pearl coloured luminescence stones set into the walls and ceiling. The dull light only served to add to the overly oppressive atmosphere. The silent

corridors felt lifeless and unwelcoming. Cirno had witnessed more cheerful cemeteries.

The first door they tried lead into a small lounge with a map of the stars etched into the ceiling. It had been painstakingly recreated and was immensely detailed with an ocean of colours. Cirno waved her arms around and imagined that she was swimming among the sparkling stars, suns and moons as she wishfully gazed up at the universe. Her own clear wings glittered with her excitement and resembled a blue star cluster in the low lighting.

Besides that, there was a bathing room made out of finely crafted bamboo. An expansive library filled with neatly categorized books that was kept immaculately clean unlike Patchouli's dusty and chaotic looking collection that only seemed to make sense to the bookworm herself. A store room filled with salted meats and dried vegetables. A modest looking bedroom that looked like a servant's quarters.

A beautifully carved door with coloured dye patters caught Mokou's attention and she grinned viciously.

"Heh, the princess' bedroom, no doubt. Those gaudy colours are just the kind of tacky decoration that she somehow finds appealing."

"What'ya doing?" asked Cirno as she followed Mokou's gaze. "Is the antidote in there?"

"Not likely," said Mokou as she carefully peered at the door frame while inspecting the flamboyant designs. "Wanna take a peak inside?"

"Not particularly," answered Flandre who managed to sound sufficiently irritated despite her condition. "How about we find.. the antidote.. first?"

*Would that possible? Pretty please with sugar on top?*

Mokou was silent for a moment as if she had forgotten the entire reason that they had come here in the first place. "Of course," said Mokou, eventually. "Business before pleasure, after all." She turned and walked away while Flandre stared daggers at her back.

As they walked down one corridor and checked whatever doors they came across, Flandre contented herself by counting the red ribbons tied around the length of Mokou's long flowing silver hair. That simple action helped keep her awake and forget about her own numbing body.

She fumbled the ribbon in her own hair, which was in itself difficult since her fingers lacked feeling, and imagined herself as tall and confident as Mokou; a more adult version of herself in other words.

While Flandre was fearless and decisive in some situations she was still insecure and always worried about what others might think of her. Partly that was because of her youthful appearance which only served to make her appear as a spoiled child who couldn't control herself at times. Even if Mokou was a little uncouth, no one would try and take advantage of such a person.

*If only I could grow up little, if I looked just a little older then no one would think such things about me. No, that isn't true. No one would think such a thing about sister and we're practically the same age. Sakuya would say something like "My lady is the picture of refinement; an unblemished portrait of perfection."*

Flandre grumbled and looked down at the cold, hard wooden floorboards.

*No one would ever say something like that about me.*

"Thanks for getting me here," said Mokou.

"Sure thing!" Cirno proclaimed happily who seemed completely oblivious to the fact that it had been mostly Flandre's talents that had seen them through. Willfully oblivious?

"This sure is a strange place though. Feels like a haunted house or something."

"Thank me by.. finding the antidote," Flandre breathed weakly.

"Yeah, this place is quite the eyesore," said Mokou who apparently hadn't heard the vampire. "Wouldn't you just love to burn it down to the foundations? Shame the residents aren't here though; it would make a grand funeral pyre."

Cirno frowned. "No, of course not. It's not that bad."

"You don't think so?" Mokou tapped the wall with her finger. "You'd think differently if you really knew them. That arrogant, oily snake Kaguya most of all."

"Why do you hate her so much, anyway?"

Mokou chuckled darkly. "It's a long story and not one that I'm willing to share. Short version is that she's a vile succubus who not even her own kind could stomach. Bah, why am I putting myself into a sour mood for anyway? This is the moment I've been waiting for, after all."

"You wanted to come here? But I thought you hated this place?"

Mokou shrugged. "Well, the place sucks but that's not why I'm going to destroy it."

Cirno looked horrified at that extreme suggestion and couldn't understand why anyone would want to do such a thing. "Destroy it? You should just face whoever annoyed you fair and square and make them apologize. Why not do that?"

"Because Kaguya was cursed with immortality, just like me and because of that, I cannot kill that little stuck up bitch no matter how many times I try but possessions are different. Just look around you at all the memories and experiences locked within each of these



irreplaceable objects. Unlike Kaguya, they can be erased from existence along with all the emotional investment attached to them. I can just picture that snotty princess' face when she realizes that thousands of years worth of lifetime has been burned to cinders! And as a bonus, Eirin as well. Oh, I hope I'm there to witness that stupefied look on her face! I can hardly wait!"

Mokou was breathing heavily with excitement and her fingers twitched as her imagination ran wild with fantasies. She looked unhinged as she explained her master plan like a classical villain just before their moment of triumph and was drinking up the moon beings imaginary tears like they were the sweetest nectar. Cirno wasn't one to wallow in someone else's misery and disliked being overly vindictive or mean spirited. Harmless pranks were fun but what Mokou was saying was certainly anything but.

"Why do you hate her so much, Mokou? You shouldn't be so mean."

Mokou shook her head and chuckled to herself. "Oh, fairy, you wouldn't understand and maybe it's better that you don't. Everything isn't all sunshine and ice cream, you know. Just stay carefree and leave everything to me." She sighed and didn't look so excited anymore, as if the ice fairy had tempered her fiery mood.

"Don't worry, Cirno. I won't incinerate this trash heap while you're still inside or until we find the antidote."

This time it was Cirno's turn to shake her head. "No, that isn't what I'm worried about. If you burn down their home, then they'll burn down your home too!"

Mokou snorted and looked around the expensively furnished home and at all the extravagant wonders that were proudly on display. It irked her to simply look at them since it was a nice reminder of Kaguya's sheer arrogance. She could picture the princess and her smug grin as she proudly showed them off to visitors just to remind them of the vast gap in their standing. Destroying them all would be

such a pleasure. She reached down and rustled Cirno's blue hair lightheartedly.

"My home isn't worth all that much. I'll gladly take the trade."

Cirno looked flustered and moved in front of the much taller Mokou to stare up at her intently. It looked quite funny to the flaming immortal that this little fairy was resolutely blocking her path with such a serious look on her face. Cirno pointed a finger right up at Mokou who couldn't hide her bemusement.

"No, you don't understand! If you start doing mean things, then they'll do mean things as well. It won't stop at burning homes, they'll target beings you care about! Isn't there anyone like that in your life, Mokou?"

The beginnings of a blush began to appear on Mokou's flustered face and she turned away. "Of course I do! Isn't that normal?"

"Yeah, having friends is great, but you shouldn't be so spiteful and put them at risk. That's why I try and have fun without ruffling any sensitive feathers. Keep things lighthearted and don't be like one of those grumpy serious types. They're no fun at all and always seem miserable and always make everyone around them miserable as well!"

Mokou chuckled lightly and looked down at the fairy affectionately. "Oh, if only everyone was as carefree as you, Cirno. Well, maybe I'll take your suggestion and take a more lighthearted approach. Humiliation might be a better bet anyway considering what a stupid stuck in the mud that Kaguya is. Yeah, simple destruction isn't very personal at all and I already have a few, much better ideas already."

Cirno looked a little perplexed at the sudden, slightly disconcerting bout of giggling. She pouted and thrust her arms down either side of her in frustration since she couldn't understand if she had been misunderstood or intentionally misinterpreted. "That isn't what I meant!"

Mokou patted Cirno's head dismissively while the icy fairy boiled under the surface about being belittled. She was torn however since she enjoyed the considerate fingers lightly caressing her aqua coloured hair and couldn't help but enjoy the pleasing sensation. Mokou found it relaxing as well and pictured her hands swimming through the deep blue sea. Just for a few fleeting moments, her mind drifted to thoughts other than her haughty rival.

Flandre grumbled under her breath and gave the lovey dovey couple a dark stare as she struggled forwards on muscles that she could barely feel. She was swaying side to side was uneasy on her feet. The fact that she was moving under her own power was in itself a miracle. Flandre felt delicate and vulnerable like a porcelain doll.

*If I lose my footing, I'll shatter and not be able to get back up. Did they forget about me or something? We're suppose to be finding the antidote here not holding hands! And why aren't you doting over me, Cirno? Did you forget what I did?*

"I'm still here you know," said an irritated Flandre who didn't appreciate all the pointless bickering, especially when her temple was throbbing profusely like an angry hornets net.

"Sorry, Flan," said Cirno as she wandered over and pressed her hand against the vampire's temple. "I didn't forget about you, you know. This place is a real mad scientist's laboratory! It's so exciting!"

Flandre's forehead was hot and sweaty and for once she didn't mind those chilly fingers pressing against her delicate skin, nor did she mind Cirno's jubilant but loud outbursts. They felt welcoming and heartfelt. Cirno grasped her hand as they resumed their search and for once, Flandre didn't feel like protesting.

As she was leading the way, no one could see Mokou's amused smirk but she didn't feel like interrupting the moment. She brushed some stray strands of silver hair away from her face and sighed while trying to remember how it felt to be so young.

The laboratory was hidden behind a metal sliding door that was so smooth and it had a gleaming mirror surface. Strange characters were engraved in it's surface that Flandre couldn't decipher. Mokou gingerly pushed the door open and immediately the quiet, almost surreal atmosphere was shattered as they were assaulted with sound.

Bubbling liquids, moving machinery, pulsing oddities and a constant humming all came crashing out at once. Cirno looked uncertainly back at Flandre who nodded reassuringly as they both walked into the laboratory.

"Wow," said Cirno as she witnessed the many spectacles that surrounded her but Flandre wasn't all that interested and just wanted to sit down somewhere and rest for a sweet moment.

Cirno looked up at the floating orange goop that twisted and turned in midair and wondered if it tasted like jelly before she noticed that her friend was no longer with her. She mumbled since she wanted to go exploring with Mokou but eventually shuffled over to where Flandre was sitting in order to help cheer her up a little.

"Hey, what's wrong, Flandre? Not feeling well I take it?"

Flandre was sitting against the far wall with her head buried between her knees. "Not really."

Cirno sat down beside Flandre and gently stroked her blonde ponytail. "Thanks for helping me, back there. Friends need to look out for each other, right?"

Cirno frowned when Flandre didn't answer. This wasn't like her at all.

"Don't worry. Mokou said she'll find the antidote soon enough. Said she knows what to look out for from bitter personal experience. Lucky us, huh? I don't see what's suppose to be bitter, though. I'll just wait here with you."

Flandre glanced up from her arm sandwich. Her red eyes looked quite striking, hidden away as they were within her own little cocoon. "You don't have to stay here with me, you know. I'm sure you'd be more happy running around the laboratory."

"Don't be silly, Flandre. I'll stay with you until you feel better. Hey, I can pull funny faces or do impressions."

She lowered her usually high pitch voice into a low serious tone which still sounded childish coming from a fairy's lips. "If I catch you worming your way through my sunflowers again I'll bury you alive and use you as fertilizer!"

Flandre didn't understand the reference but chuckled a little all the same. Her impressions were just that bad.

"Listen, Cirno. You never asked me where I came from. Aren't you even a little bit curious?"

Cirno thought for a moment and then shook her head. "Well, not really. I meet new friends and meanies every single day. Gensokyo is such a large place with Youkai flying all over the place as they carry out their evil plans or go treasure hunting or whatever. If someone wants to come along with me, then I just let 'em and see where it takes me. Of course, I have to be the leader to make sure everyone is safe."

"That's sounds like a nice, happy life you have, Cirno. I wanted a life like that where I can do whatever I want and meet new people by just taking a simple stroll through any nearby forest and stumbling upon some adventure like a kidnapped princess or a cursed magical sword that needed retrieving but my sister would never allow such a thing. Well, I found out that Gensokyo isn't much like a fairytail anyway."

"Sister? You have a sister?"

"Yes, I do and I love her very much but sometimes I'd wish that she trusted me just a little bit more. I know that she cares about me but the only reason I'm out here in the first place is because I snuck out without permission. That's the real reason I was forced to help Yukari, because if I didn't, then she'd tell my sister and I'm afraid that she wouldn't look at me in that same loving way if she ever found out."

Cirno hesitated but kept stroking Flandre's soft, blonde hair all the same. She expected the proud vampire to object to such comforting but Flandre seemed content to let her continue and Cirno quite liked running her fingers through Flandre's long, golden strands.

"Don't worry, Flandre. Whatever happens, I'll always trust you. Your sister just wants to keep you out of trouble, kinda like with Letty and me. Letty is kind but always complains that I put myself into too much danger. It's annoying at times because I can look after myself but I know she's only doing it because she cares about me. I'm sure your sister is just trying to look out for you, even if it might seem like she doesn't trust you."

*I can hardly blame my sister, though. It's usually my fault and I know that but if she never places some trust in me then I'll never be able to spread my wings. It's been long enough now; surely it's been long enough?*

"You're not mad at me?" asked Flandre, her voice slightly muffled from her arms. "I hid things from you." *Like I'm still hiding things.*

"Of course not. This night has been one of the most exciting nights I've had in a long while. How could I be angry at you? I can't wait to tell Daiyousei about all this. Maybe I should introduce you? Could I meet your sister one day?

Flandre wondered whether such a thing could ever happen. *Maybe if she accepted a job as a maid, temporarily of course. As much as I like her, she'd never satisfied Sakuya's outlandish standards.*

"My, that was a rather interesting story," came a muffled voice from the next room over.

Pale, shimmering white hands phased through the wall and draped themselves around Flandre's shoulders. They were almost weightless but held that same unnerving quality that made Flandre's skin crawl. She stifled a gasp and threw herself away from the wall, the sense of wrongness almost enough to repel her by itself.

Cirno yelled out in terror and crawled backwards until she hit a worktable full of delicate glass vials that wobbled threatening just over her head.

"Get off of me, Yuyuko!"

"Oh, but why?" cooed the shimmering ghost. "I was so touched by your story that I just wanted to hold you in my arms."

Flandre's face turned red with a mixture of outrage and embarrassment that this creepy stalker had been listening to her heartfelt confession. Yuyuko was sticking out of the very solid wooden wall as if the inconvenience of being corporeal didn't apply to her.

"You have no right to touch me, Yuyuko!"

*I feel giddy just looking at you!*

"Please, Flandre. If anyone should be displeased, then it should be me. You didn't uphold your end of the bargain."

"Stop your annoying games. I left the fake sunstone with Alyssia just as you wanted. When she wakes up, she'll have it just as you wanted."

Yuyuko sighed. "Yes, and unless she is a total halfwit she'll wonder why it just happened to fall into her lap. Do you believe in miracles, Flandre? Alyssia, is it? It hope she does at least."

"None of that matters to me," snapped Flandre. "Take some friendly advice and just leave us alone."

"Yeah," added Cirno who had finally found her voice. "You're a ghastly being that should stick to haunting cemeteries. Flandre told me all about your blackmail! You should-"

"Silence, fairy!" Yuyuko spat. Her agitation caused her form to fluctuate so that parts of the wall shifted back into vision. "I'll not be talked down to by a fairy. You wouldn't understand anyway; that applies to both of you. You cannot see the dazzling brilliance as a soul burns brightly with spiritual power. It's like the most beautiful candle as it fights to stay aflame in the midst of a raging storm. That's what I saw when I fought you, Flandre, and I want to experience that magnificent sensation again."

"Well, when I see you, all I feel is utter revulsion. Your grasping hands and lecherous panting. The..the way you constantly stare at me like a slab of meat. Cirno said it best; You're ghastly now leave me alone before I lose my tempter!"

"Yeah!" Cirno added excitedly. "Buzz off!"

Yuyuko scowled and drifted along the wall like a fluttering leaf caught in the breeze. "My, what rude little children. Well, your usefulness has come to an end so now I can do whatever I want with you which will probably involve me ripping the very soul from your disrespectful body and dining on the tasty morsel with perhaps a helping of crushed ice to go along with it? Yes, that sounds quite delectable. If you apologise however and bow down to me, I might reconsider."

*As if that has a chance of happening.*

"Hey, who are you talking to?" asked Mokou as she appeared from behind some gleaming metal construct who's purpose escaped the rational mind. When she saw Yuyuko poking her upper body out from the wall, she dropped the notebook that she had been thumbing through and gawked in surprise. "It's you!"



"Oh?" said Yuyuko. "I thought it would be the other cursed immortal, not the brutish firebrand."

"Haven't you killed me enough already you sadistic sow?" Mokou yelled as her mouth twisted into a venomous snarl. Bright red flames leapt from her body like solar flares that seemed to fuel her anger even further.

Flandre had no idea why she was so enraged and didn't really have much time to ponder such a question as Mokou's hands projected a stream of fiery death that instantly turned the laboratory into a sauna. Yuyuko was bathed in yellow and orange light as she withdrew into the wall before it was slammed with superheated fire.

Flandre and Cirno both shielded themselves as the intense heat roared and licked outwards like an angry dragon's breath. The wooden wall was transformed into smoldering ash and collapsed to the floor in short order.

"What the hell was that?" asked a stunned Flandre who's skin still tingled with heat. Cirno looked a little shell shocked as well.

"You trying to kill us?" coughed Cirno as the black smoke hung in the air like an unwelcome guest.

"Sorry," said Mokou absentmindedly as she stared intently at the newly created window into the adjoining room. "I know that woman. She took great delight in killing me during the moon incident along with her pet silver haired demon. I'd swore I'd pay her back if we ever met again. That soul sucking monster will still be floating around so stay alert!"

Cirno shot a worried look over her shoulder while Flandre looked up at the ceiling. Mokou looked like she was about to sat more but another section of the wall crashed down to the floor as the fire continued to burn.

The smoke was growing thicker by the second and there was no telling how many ticking time bombs would go off if the flames reached them considering that this was a fully equipped laboratory. Flandre was about to ask if Cirno could calm down for just a moment and help put out the fires before she spotted a mumbling roll of carpet twirling on the floor in the next room.

Flandre carefully jumped over and found that the roll of carpet was actually a small bunny girl who had been gagged and tied with rope. She didn't look particularly threatening with her light pink dress and small stature. She looked up at Flandre with tears in her eyes like butter wouldn't melt and wagged her fluffy bunny tail as she squirmed around on the floor. Flandre couldn't understand her constant mumbling but her expression was one of worried panic.

*Was she a victim of Yuyuko? What is she doing here in the first place? She has the same kind of look as Reisen.*

"Hello, Tewi," greeted Mokou though her face remained impassive. She walked around the captive while looking down at her intently.

"This little trickster is a resident of Eientei and a general troublemaker. She's the one to thank for all the cruel and creative traps that litter the approach to this accursed place. Isn't that right, Tewi?" Flandre couldn't help but notice the dripping sarcasm in that last part.

Tewi flinched and recoiled slightly as Mokou slowly bent down to remove her gag without a hint of compassion. She whimpered and looked around at the assembled faces that all seemed to wear a different emotion. Secretly, she wondered on how to turn the situation to her advantage.

"T-thanks for saving me," gasped Tewi. "That Yuyuko has a screw loose or something. She just attacked me and dragged me here out of the blue!"

"So Yuyuko just randomly attacked you?" asked Mokou. "No provocation whatsoever? No insults, taunting or teasing? No traps or pranks?"

Try as she might, Tewi couldn't help but smirk.

## Chasing Phantoms

"And then she dangled innocent little me above a bottomless pit of wailing souls until I agreed to lead her past the household's defences. How could she treat me like that, me, who is a friend to everyone?"

Mokou sighed like she had heard it all before and shook her head dismissively. Just being in the same room as Tewi was enough to give her a headache. Apparently Yuyuko hadn't reacted well when confronted with Tewi's unique brand of slapstick humour. As a result, she had been tied up and left here while Yuyuko caught up with a few distant friends, as she so delightfully put it.

"Hey, stop touching my tail!" yelled Tewi as she struggled against her bonds. Mokou glowered at Cirno who sheepishly backed away from the fluffy, but untrustworthy captive.

"Oh, you'd better take this before I forget," said Mokou as she fished out a small glass vial from her pocket and handed it to Flandre who couldn't help but stare at the swirling liquid like it was sulfuric acid.

"Are you sure this is safe?"

"Of course I am," exclaimed Mokou. "What's the matter? You don't trust me or something?"

"I never said that," said Flandre. "Why wouldn't I trust someone that I've only just met to pick out a potion from a laboratory full of them and drink it down without a second thought?"

Mokou stared silently for a moment and Cirno squirmed a little at the uncomfortable atmosphere as she imagined invisible heat waves of anger rising off Mokou before she eventually blew her top like an erupting volcano.

"Don't be rude to our new friend, Flan," she mumbled.

*Maybe I said too much without thinking. Damn it, I feel so cranky with this accursed poison running through my bloodstream. Get this disgusting substance out of me right this minute before I break something just to release this tension!*

Mokou looked entirely unamused as she reached downwards. Flandre couldn't help but flinch as she was once again reminded at just how tall and imposing this silver haired woman was as her grasping hand loomed over her.

"Owww," Flandre moaned as Mokou reached underneath her hat and roughly rustled her blonde hair hard enough to make her stumble. She felt like a small, helpless animal being coddled by an overbearing owner.

"If you can complain that much, then you must be feeling better, right? If I wasn't such a nice lady then I might feel a little offended that you didn't believe me. You do believe me, right?"

Even though she was tied up and seemingly completely helpless, Tewi couldn't help herself but giggle. "I don't think anyone would ever accuse you of being-" she murmured but stopped when Mokou glowered down at her from above like a vengeful god.

"All right, all right, I believe you," Flandre said frantically as she held up the vial to ward off any further hair petting. Mokou smiled and released the flustered vampire who sighed in relief. Cirno averted her gaze before the sight of the fluffy bedhead vampire made her giggle like a maniac. Flandre grumbled and downed the mixture as quickly as possible without causing herself to choke or throw up. She blinked in surprise.

*Hey, this isn't all that bad. Tastes kinda like lime.*

Mokou nodded in approval as she carefully produced a second vial from her other pocket which looked almost identical to the first, only this time the questionable liquid inside was a subtly different colour.

"Good, that should help mask the taste of this," she said before pushing the vial to the entrance of Flandre's mouth and pouring the contents inside before she could object. It tasted icky like thick honey, only without the sweet taste and Flandre's eyes went wide as she unwillingly swallowed some of it. Her eyes began to water and she grasped Mokou's arm while looking up at her with a sniffling but angry expression.

Mokou winced as her arm was squeezed tightly, the strength of which intensified with every passing second so she quickly finished administering her surprise therapy. Cirno gasped and looked on with increasing levels of concern as she recalled her friend's explosive temper.

"Urugh," Flandre coughed violently as Mokou withdrew the vial. The only thing that kept her from lashing out was the fact that she was far too busy wiping her eyes and sucking in large, cleansing lungfuls of air.

"W-what are you thinking, you flaming idiot! You've got some real nerve trying to force feed me that pond scum."

"Settle down," sighed Mokou. "You wouldn't have swallowed it otherwise and your body would have soon seized up without it. Trust me, I know. How do I know, you ask? Because I've suffered at the hands of those inbred bastards countless times and know very well the crippling effects that particular brand of poison does to the body."

Flandre was still bitter about her treatment and her fists were trembling. Her rainbow wings glowed faintly as they fed on their master's displeasure. Cirno whimpered and was about to try and calm down the situation but before she could, Mokou leaned forwards so that she was only inches away from Flandre's face. Her look was stern and resolute.

"First your arms and legs feel heavy like they're gradually turning to stone. That sensation will spread until it becomes difficult to breath, difficult to see and hear and difficult for your heart to keep beating.

You feel every inch of you slowly fading away like you're a stranger in your own body. See, look at those charms."

She pointed towards the red ribbons that she herself had tied in among Flandre's hair and delicately removed one. Flandre grumbled and followed Mokou's hands with a dark stare. Every tug and pull against her fine, blonde hair threatened to send her spiralling into an almighty temper tantrum. Mokou held out the ribbon in front of her and the sight of it shocked Flandre out of any trivial misgivings she might have harboured.

Its crimson, warm lustre had and been replaced with a black, twisted strand of cloth that looked more like a withered branch than one of Mokou's magically infused ribbons. It burst into flame in Mokou's hand as she erased every trace of it from existence along with the wretched poison.

"That deals with that," she said. "You don't want to end up like that charm, do you?"

Flandre grudgingly shook her head. It was true that she was already feeling better as her strength and good health gradually returned to her like a long lost friend and she was forced to admit that Mokou knew what she was doing.

*I just wish that you weren't such a jerk about it.*

"What's that sound?" asked Cirno.

Flandre looked up to see that those deceptively beautiful scissors tearing through the ceiling with flashes of ethereal brilliance. They were easily large enough to bisect the entire room and of course, anything within their path. Everyone scrambled to avoid the hungry blades as they dug a deep furrow into the flooring which filled the chamber with the crawling sound of tearing floorboards.

"Hey, untie me! Untie me!" yelled a panic-stricken Tewi.

As the scissors passed by Flandre, she winced as the unpleasant aura of long dead souls pulled at her very being, as if they were inviting the vampire to join them. Mokou and Cirno had ended up on opposite sides of the room and looked on in panicked fascination as the pale, shimmering scissors quickly changed into a glowing oriental fan. The room was immediately filled with an unsettling pink light.

"Get out of the room," yelled Mokou with enough urgency that both Flandre and Cirno were already running before they even realized what was happening. Behind her, Flandre could hear the soft laughing of Yuyuko as the fan birthed countless white butterflies that filled the space with a swarm of fluttering spectres.

Once in the hallway, Flandre slammed the sliding door shut which might have seemed foolish to her had she had more time to think. The physical realm held no sway over Yuyuko's otherworldly talents.

Cirno looked flushed and was breathing heavily but Flandre also saw the beginnings of a smile appear as the excitement of their predicament washed over her. Flandre smiled.

*Why not enjoy things? Isn't that what I've always done?*

"Get away from the door!" Mokou yelled. "Those butterflies will suck the life from you and turn you into a dried husk."

The corridor soon became filled with shining white shapes that packed the air with so much white light that it became difficult to stop yourself from blinking. Flandre was forced to turn her gaze away as she ran away from the ghastly sight. The pale butterflies cast reflections on Flandre's own wings which startled her before she recognized them for what they were.

"What's the plan, Flandre?" asked Cirno who was running in front of her. Flandre's heart fluttered a little at the thought of someone placing so much trust in her and hesitated in her thoughts.



"Finding Yuyuko would be a good start," replied Mokou. "I'll scour this entire place with flame if I need to!"

Mokou pushed herself upwards on a cushion of fire that resembled the blooming of a bright petalled flower. Cirno was repelled by the intense heat and backed away as her wings cried icy tears. The ceiling was instantly roasted into microscopic pieces so that the vengeful Mokou didn't even need to slow down as she disappeared onto the first floor.

Flandre rapidly blinked away the after images that plagued her vision and urged Cirno to follow her before they were left behind completely. The icy fairy nodded while in the process of heartily swatting away the stiflingly hot air that surrounded the both of them.

The first floor was quite similar in design to what Flandre had already seen with dark and brooding corridors and the same creepy atmosphere that was only made all the worse by the faint, pale glow that passed for lighting in this household.

Flandre could easily tell in which direction Mokou had travelled by the smouldering trail of carpet. She remained quiet for a moment and listened to the echoing footsteps while trying to ignore the stench of singed wool. Rather than simply follow her, Flandre contemplated on the best way to smoke out the meddlesome princess of the dead which was the direct opposite of her overly energetic fairy friend.

Cirno was cheering and jumping around as she let the excitement of the hunt wash over her but stopped only after a few leaps and bounds when she realized that she was alone in her pursuit. She frowned and reluctantly walked back to where Flandre was brooding.

"What's wrong, Flandre? We needed to get moving before Mokou beats us to the punch! You don't want to lose out, do you? We need to get moving and get that old maid!"

"Obviously. I'm not letting Mokou steal my chance away, not after everything that's happened tonight. That's why I'm going head down

there." Flandre pointed in the opposite direction that Mokou had taken. Cirno followed the gesture and shook her head.

"But meanie Yuyuko attacked us from over there," said the fairy, her voice full of frustration.

"I know that, but Yuyuko has some kind of twisted obsession with me. She'll think we're splitting up and come after me and then we'll have her all to ourselves. Sound good?"

Cirno smiled and nodded, content in the knowledge that she wasn't going to miss out on any of the action. In her mind, punishing evil doers who sucked the fun out of everything they touched was a just cause.

Of course, most of the time she either failed spectacularly or just goofed around but here was a real chance to smite someone who really deserved it and Cirno definitely wanted to be involved. She carefully giggled so that Flandre wouldn't hear while she followed closely behind the vampire. She didn't want to give the impression that she wasn't taking this seriously.

Flandre was using all of her concentration to try and find Yuyuko before she invariably showed her scheming face from behind an otherwise innocent looking door or wall. Her gleaming red eyes were busy scanning every single nook and cranny for anything amiss but everything was as quiet as could be. Blocking out Cirno's inane giggling was easy enough but Flandre could feel no presence, visual or otherwise to find Yuyuko before she herself was found.

*I'll never sense someone with complete mastery over spirits but thankfully that creepy stalker will do all the work for me. I just need to be ready and waiting when it happens.*

"Whatever happened to Tewi?" Cirno asked as she gingerly pushed opened a sliding door to peer inside.

"What?"

"You know, the bunny eared girl. Do you think she escaped the flames and butterflies?"

Flandre frowned. "I don't know," she replied while trying to keep the irritation out of her voice.

*I'm trying to keep us out of danger here!*

For the longest while their searching proved fruitless which only served to heighten the tension. Flandre tensed with every single step as her cautious eyes half expected ghostly hands to reach out of the floorboards at any moment and snatch away her soul before she could even utter a single, panicked breath. Either that, or she would attack Cirno and strike at Flandre while she was preoccupied. The waiting was turning Flandre even more paranoid than usual and her forehead strained with the effort to squeeze out the faintest trace of life in this otherwise oppressively empty household.

The low ambient light annoyingly resembled the kind of lost souls that Yuyuko employed which didn't help Flandre's nerves. Cirno wandered up to another sliding door and smiled with anticipation but her hand stopped short when she heard something off in the distance.

"Is that singing?" Cirno asked.

Flandre could hear it now, if only faintly but as they progressed down the corridor she could start to make out the melody. It was a sombre, soft song that was completely devoid of all lyrics but despite this, the words spoke to Flandre in words that she couldn't understand. The voice was also unmistakably Yuyuko's which sent goosebumps up the Scarlet sister's neck.

"That's Yuyuko, isn't it?" Cirno asked aloud, as if there was any doubt.

Flandre nodded. The singing was definitely laced with magic as the air was positively charged with it. Even the walls vibrated and pulsed

as they reacted to this foreign element that had no business in the household of the moon. Cirno began to inch at her arm as something invisible tugged at her skin. It was formless like water but still, it pulled; not at the physical body, but the soul or spiritual essence that resided within every living being.

Flandre felt it now as the singing grew in intensity and pitch, like the crowning moment of a performance. She stopped moving as notes wrapped themselves around her and pulled at her soul much like the twisting nether attack that Yuyuko had employed earlier in the Kourindou. It wasn't the white hot pain that a needle prick would inflect, instead it was an all encompassing sickness that drained the will to stay concious.

"I don't like that singing," moaned Cirno as she slumped against the wall. "I'm feeling sleepy all of a sudden."

The song's words were actually starting to make sense to Flandre which was deeply unsettling. She didn't want to listen to a piece of music if the price for understanding it was to pass on to the afterlife. Despite this fact, Flandre ignored the crawling sensation that was creeping across her body and spent a few moments pinpointing the direction of the deceptively beautiful verse.

She used her fangs to lightly brush up against her moist tongue and used the mild pain to help her focus as her wings came alive with a surge of power that went up her body like a bolt of lightening. Her hand trembled before she let loose the highly concentrated cone of energy that was no wider than a copper coin.

It neatly punched through walls and furniture like a hunter's arrow fated to find it's target. Yuyuko, who had secluded herself inside an unused storeroom smiled blissfully as she danced around while singing one of her favourite, melancholy songs. Her hands swept through the air as white flapping butterflies flew around her in rhythm with her vocal tones.

She felt like she was flying among the clouds as she felt the pleasing sensation of familiar essences flow into the room. It sometimes saddened her that nobody else could witness the magnificence of someone's soul. So many flavours and emotions wrapped up in a tiny, shifting object.

Even now, she felt elated that Flandre's soul was resonating to her words. It was powerful of course but such a simple reason wouldn't have been enough to garner her attention. It was explosive and wondrous like the cataclysmic creation of a universe but also held a darker nature that desperately wanted to stay in the shadows.

It was this inner conflict along with all the bright, clashing colours that were a vivid representation of her wings that made it something special; something to be treasured.

While it wasn't her intention, the icy fairy's soul was also caught up in her performance. It was innocent and transparent and held the appearance of a peaceful blizzard of snowflakes that were suspended in time like a frozen snow globe. It was earnest and genuine and was quite pleasing to simply bask in it's trusting aura but Yuyuko reluctantly pushed it away in favour of focusing all her attention on the increasingly bright and vigorous soul of Flandre.

The group of circling butterflies became agitated as the energies floating around inside the room increased dramatically. Yuyuko scowled as she attempted to reassure the intangible spirits that all was well and that they shouldn't be intimidated by something entirely within her control but they simply refused to listen and angrily flapped their wings in protest. Yuyuko could feel the building energies now and stopped her singing to face one of the wooden walls.

The pillar of light pieced through the wood and sheared through the mass of ethereal butterflies as they attempted to shield their master by placing themselves within the line of fire. Yuyuko gasped like a deer caught in headlights and quickly willed into existence her own multiple barriers of protection but she knew from experience that

Flandre's destructive attacks had the exceptional ability to shatter anything they came into contact with.

It pained Yuyuko to see so many of her own butterflies go up in flames as their wings burned and fizzled out one by one but even that sacrifice wasn't enough as the small, focused beam stuck against her barriers. The room was filled with several loud claps that rocked the storeroom and toppled several items off the nearby shelving units.

Incredibly bright pink sparks were stuck off Yuyuko's shield like a hammer striking an anvil and the pressure inside the room became unbearable. Yuyuko shrieked as her eardrums popped from the shattering glass like sound as her barriers collapsed and gave way.

As soon as the singing stopped, Flandre was moving with purpose and fiery determination in her eyes.

*Wait there and catch your breath, Cirno. I'll make sure that witch doesn't harm us ever again.*

She rounded corners and raced along hallways until she heard a panicked shriek coming from a nearby closed door. Flandre felt her blood pumping as she kicked in the door with enough force to rip it from its hinges and send it crashing through the storeroom. Her skirt fluttered and she held it down as she charged inside. There were torn pillows and feathers strewn across the floor but no sign of the conceited princess.

"Yuyuko!" she called out. "Where are you? Didn't you want to play?"

*This is so frustrating! How long will she continue this game of hide and seek?*

"Here I am," said Yuyuko.

Flandre flinched inwardly but held in her surprise successfully as she looked up at the ceiling. Yuyuko was smiling down at her with that

annoyingly smug and obsessive expression of her's.

"Didn't you enjoy my performance? Indiscriminately attacking me like that, it's almost like you don't love me?"

Flandre shuddered. "Don't make me laugh. Why would I lov... like someone like you? You must be jealous of my youthful body and soul. That's why you won't leave me alone, isn't it, because you're just bitter that you're a disembodied, centuries old ghost and I'm still in the prime of my life. That's it, isn't it?"

Yuyuko tutted and shook her head, her pink hair dangling downwards as she did so. "Why would I be jealous? I'm the only one that can experience the joyful splendour of one's soul. It truly saddens me that one blessed with such a beautiful soul is such a childish little girl. You should just relinquish your soul to me as I'll make far better use of it than one so immature."

"You're not going to lay a single hand on me or my soul!" Flandre yelled as she lost control of herself and leapt up at Yuyuko who withdrew inside the wooden ceiling. She snarled at Yuyuko's intention to drag this out even further instead of standing and fighting and dramatically smashed herself through the floorboards in search of the action she desired.

Flandre's hands hit the floor as wooden shards impacted all around her and the air was thick with sawdust. Even among all the chaos, not a single piece of flying debris hit the vampire as they all were thrust away by her powerful aura.

Flandre rose up from her crouch to find herself surrounded by the ghostly spirits of countless humans. They were all engaged in some form of appropriate activity for whatever walk of life they chose in life. Dancers twirled and pirouetted, housewife's absent-mindedly dusted and cleaned, butchers chopped and many, many others.

Among them stood Yuyuko who seemed quite proud of her obvious deception. Flandre scowled, annoyed that Yuyuko was attempting

the same annoying trick and expecting it to work a second time.

"Are you serious? I suppose all these spirits are all going to attack me at once, just like before?"

"No," Yuyuko replied. "Nobody enjoys a repeat performance." She rubbed the front of her elegant blue dress which was blackened from her narrow escape from the storeroom. Where as before there had been intricate patterns, now only torn white lace hung loosely from her chest. "Is destruction all you think about, Flandre? It wouldn't surprise me considering the inner turmoil in your soul."

Flandre blinked with surprise while Yuyuko grinned and swept her hand around the assembled spirits.

"A vampire is a curious thing. You see all that human blood that they consume has the potential to leave behind trace emotions, such as fear or regret that attach themselves like a curse. I'd imagine that you've got your fair share of blood on your hands, so to speak. Do you recognize any of these faces?"

Flandre knew that she was being caught up in her adversary's pace but she simply couldn't help but look around at the assembled faces.

*Don't be tricked.*

In unison, the figures, young and old, stopped whatever daily task they had all been previously doing and all turned to look at Flandre with judgemental stares. The weight of all their gazes bore down upon Flandre like a ton of bricks. She had always hated the fact that she was so self-conscious about what other people thought about her, particularly her beloved elder sister.

"I wonder," remarked Yuyuko. "How many of these faces do you recognize? How many did you kill? How many children did you leave without parents, or did you lose count over the centuries? Maybe your parents are among them? Perhaps that blonde woman with the tattered looking apron, hmm?"



"Shut up!" Flandre screamed. "I don't know any of these humans. They're all just faces to me! They have no right to judge me, just like you! You're the one who takes pleasure in manipulating and feeding off souls. You're the vampire here, now shut up!"

The sliding doors and fixtures all shook as if in fear from Flandre's outburst. She dismissed the spirits as obvious ploys and instead attacked the source of all these misgivings. She clenched her fists and lashed out angrily at Yuyuko who blinked away tears as her shields shone brightly under the thunderous and explosive stream.

Flandre lunged forwards as butterflies swarmed through the solid matter of the flooring and tried to swallow her up in a cloud of fluttering wings that would kill with the slightest touch.

In front of her stood Yuyuko who's image was distorted by her glowing pink barrier that resembled a cloudy, misted up window. Flandre's claws sunk into the transparent surface and ripped great rents in the glimmering shield. Behind it, Yuyuko struggled to maintain the flickering barriers while she observed the vicious sight of Flandre flailing away at her. Each swipe destroyed a shield faster than Yuyuko could replace them which shouldn't be possible for one with her level of expertise.

Even though only a thin line separated Yuyuko from being cut to ribbons, she was immensely happy that Flandre's fiery soul was burning brightly once again. It looked and felt breathtaking as Flandre's red eyes mixed with the shimmering pink hue from her barriers to create a crackling spider web of bleeding colour. Still, she couldn't enjoy the sight for much longer without falling victim to the very object of her desire. Yuyuko sighed.

"Are... you... hungry, vampire?" she breathed in between her parries.

All at once, the spirits gathered around Flandre all split their wrists or cut open their necks with whatever implements they had to hand in total silence. Those without tools simply used their nails or teeth in a

horrible display of savagery which was totally devoid of emotion or feeling.

Blood sprayed out all about Flandre like she had stumbled across some kind of twisted fountain straight out of someone's nightmare. It didn't matter that it was otherworldly, the sight of so much flowing blood wrapped Flandre in a dreamlike trance.

It held no scent, nor was the gruesome display rooted in reality and yet Flandre found herself utterly incapable of resisting that one, single most important urge that all vampires were constantly plagued by: the need to consume blood. Flandre's breathing became heavy and laboured as she descended into a more primal state. Her ferocious assault became clumsy as her attention was drawn to the rain of spectral blood that rained down all around her.

*So much blood! I feel like dancing around as it stains my face red!*

Flandre snarled at those irritating barriers that had thus far denied her Yuyuko's soft, inviting neck. Mocking laughter filled her ears as she imagined the barriers taunting her at her ineptitude. Despite this, she giggled as her eyes shone with a frenzied glint.

*Don't indulge yourself just yet, Flandre. Yuyuko's blood will be all the sweeter!*

In her bloodlust, she slashed the remaining pinkness into oblivion and grinned manically at her moment of triumph. Her tongue lathered up the inside of her mouth in blissful anticipation. A sharp bang sounded out as the barriers fizzled out of existence but Flandre was dumbfounded at her prey's miraculous absence.

*No, this isn't fair! I'm so hungry! How dare she tease me in such a manner!*

"Do you have something else on your mind?" Yuyuko whispered.

Flandre crouched low and spun around in the blink of an eye as several butterflies passed harmlessly overhead. Her face glowed with an eerie light as she pushed herself back up on her feet and struck out against a surprised looking Yuyuko who shrieked meekly as she was knocked back with a gleaming flash.

Without those annoying barriers to worry about, Flandre stalked forwards as she savoured the look of astonishment on Yuyuko's face. Flandre licked her glistening fangs and made sure that the gesture was clearly noticeable. Fear always added a little spice to the proceedings and Yuyuko certainly deserved special treatment.

*Oh, how can such a cruel fate befall upon me? Hehehe... I'm going to enjoy this.*

There seemed to be no end to the spiritual fountain of blood that filled the air with such an alluring sight. It sprinkled against Flandre's face and she lovingly caressed her cheeks but she soon discovered that she felt little satisfaction from the formless substance. She wanted, no, desperately longed for the real thing.

A terror stricken Yuyuko feebly held up a trembling arm to shield herself from her impending judgement. That innocent gesture irked Flandre perhaps more than it should.

"Don't you dare try and escape this," Flandre muttered.

Flandre sniffed the air and noticed a fresh cut on the underside of Yuyuko's wrist. The sleeve of her dress had been stained red as it seeped into the fabric and little droplets dribbled down her pale skin, the constant pitter patter serving as an irresistible temptation.

Yuyuko hid a wry smile beneath her downturned gaze and frilly hat and she listened to the vampire's ragged breathing with no small amount of amusement. Amusement at her own deceptions and at the very fact that someone of her stature had to resort to trickery in the first place.

Had Flandre been more sound of mind, she might have noticed the subtle way that Yuyuko emphasized her injury by proudly holding it aloft like some kind of invitation but as things stood, Flandre simply couldn't help but lunge at the generously pre-offered meal.

Yuyuko glanced up to see a horror show of sharp talons and fangs that belonged to an extremely dangerous and hungry vampire and fought down the urge to look away. Her other hand opened and out flew a single white butterfly that created glowing trails with each beat of it's glowing wings.

As soon as Flandre came into contact with it her whole body seized up as an unimaginable pain took hold of her. Touching the butterfly felt worse than frostbite as an unsettling coldness spread throughout her chest. She gasped and rolled around on the floor as her soul attempted to rip itself from it's mortal confines.

Flandre banged her fist on the flooring as she battled with the urge to throw up. Her wing-tips all turned a pale shade of white and lost any trace of colour. She clutched both hands around her chest; she wouldn't allow her spirit to take the easy way out and escape this searing agony without her permission.

Yuyuko observed the scene with morbid fascination. She stepped back a little as unhealthy energies began to fill the tight space between rooms.

"You should be happy, Flandre. I even cut myself just for you."

Yuyuko watched the vampire struggle around on the floor and shook her head.

"Just give in, Flandre. It will be so much less painful if you do so and I'm not one to make someone suffer unnecessarily. My beloved butterflies are fragments of the afterlife and can help in your journey, but only if you are gracious enough to let them, otherwise, I fear that you might become a wayward soul. It really is a terrible fate to be trapped in eternal limbo without any sense of where or who you are.

Completely cut off and totally alone with all of your sensations reduced to nothingness. Imagine drowning in a featureless sea where you cannot even feel the hairs on your skin. If death is a release, then this is torture of the soul. Trust me, I know."

## Captive Audience

"You look so radiant Flandre as you try to cling to life. It's often said that a life burns more fiercely when it's on the brink of death; like a candle fighting against the wind. Does it hurt I wonder? Tell me, how much does it hurt? Do you want me to end your suffering?"

Yuyuko held her dress as she carefully crouched down to better appreciate the spectacle. For a moment, she quietly observed Flandre's struggle against the ghostly butterflies that latched onto her body like leaches.

In a sense, that's exactly what they were as they gradually syphoned off Flandre's being into a violent whirlpool that lingered above her like a raging storm-cloud. Yuyuko tentatively reached out and, with trembling fingers, she wrapped herself in the constantly shifting blanket.

"Ah, my skin is tingling! I can feel every single ripple of emotion as it cascades against me!"

Yuyuko clutched her shoulders tightly as she regarded the snarling vampire with a sly smile.

"My, such scandalous feelings you have against me. Such animal lust! Wanting to kiss me with your fangs like that and never let go. You should be ashamed of yourself."

She giggled and licked her lips as she tasted the air that was positively filled with essence.

"Well, I don't particularly mind. I can understand wanting to devour someone so badly that it almost hurts. We are Youkai, after all. This is something that I would never mention to Yukari but I secretly hunger to dine on the living. It's a constant urge that stays with me with every waking moment. My sweet Youmu thinks of me as a

glutton but no matter how much I eat, I cannot quench this maddening hunger."

Butterflies darkened and went up in white flames as they were consumed in Flandre's struggles but no sooner had they departed back to the afterlife, then more took their place. Flandre tried to yell but only a whisper escaped her lips and her wings had by this point become utterly devoid of their usual brilliance. Those butterflies that survived the vampire's wrath gorged themselves on their host and slowly filled up the rapidly growing whirlpool that showed no signs of ending.

"Surely you can relate, vampire? I'm not allowed to eat humans; not even live animals in order to keep my promise to Yukari. You know, the law that states that every dispute must be settled by non-lethal means such as danmaku. Such a cruel law, don't you think?"

Yuyuko tutted at herself for wallowing in self-pity, especially when she should be feeling happy with such a wondrous soul around her. She had a universe of emotions and experiences to indulge herself with and yet she simply couldn't help her own tormented thoughts from rising to the surface. Perhaps it was because Flandre was a captive audience who, in her maddened state, was in no position to understand what she was hearing.

"You know," she said, hesitantly. "When I ended my own life, a great cherry blossom tree grew from the blackened earth above my resting place. I only know of this from second hand knowledge because at the time I was stuck in eternal limbo until I was able to pull myself free from it's clutches and leave my earthly body behind me. After so much time, I was finally able to re-enter the world as a ghost. That's why I said that it was like an endless torture, because not even being able to comprehend the method of your torment is a cruel fate indeed. But thankfully because of that, the memory is a distant one; like a dream... or rather a nightmare. The hunger still remains though as a constant reminder that I need to make up for lost time and the only time I'm able to be true to myself is during incidents like this one where watchful eyes cannot see me."

Yuyuko seemed lost in thought for a moment. Her gaze was unfocused and aimless.

"Picture being blindfolded and gagged while sinking in an endless abyss that chills you to the bone, all the while being clueless as to the very nature of your predicament. Couple that with an insatiable hunger that you cannot satisfy. Though distant, the sense of total despair and isolation was unimaginable which is why I warned you about being such a naughty little girl. Now you might suffer the same fate for your insolence but then again, that firebrand spirit of yours is so breathtaking."

Yuyuko giggled, a little of her former happiness returning to her demeanour. She sucked in a little of the captivating substance and rolled it around in her mouth like a succulent sweet which caused Flandre to gasp and jerk upwards as much as the butterflies would allow.

Every inch of her skin suddenly felt wet and ticklish as her earthly body experienced the same feelings as her spirit. Yuyuko blissfully held her bulging cheeks with both hands as her taste buds were oversaturated with countless tastes from Flandre's memories. A moan escaped her lips as she was almost overwhelmed, but in a pleasing way, like binging on delicious cake.

"Oh," Yuyuko moaned knowingly. "So that's the reason why. I feel a lot of resentment within you, little Flandre, but that comes as no surprise. You're like a broken doll who fractured off parts of her own subconscious to bury some particularly unpleasant memories but you've been unable to fully reform the pieces back together. Hmm, either unable or unwilling. All you can do is push the different puzzle pieces up against each other and hope that they form something cohesive while making sure that nothing unwanted slips between the cracks. You've become quite good at it; so much so that your mind performs it automatically for the most part. However, such a volatile personality doesn't help matters much."



Yuyuko couldn't help but feel empathy for her captured plaything. She pushed her forehead against Flandre's and felt what little warmth remained. Yuyuko's short pink hair was close enough to tickle the wincing girl's smooth skin as she planted a tender kiss against her forehead.

"It isn't good to let things build up within yourself like that," Yuyuko said, her voice barely above a whisper. "A thought can be a dangerous thing, especially if it's given enough time to claw at the back of your skull. You need to release it, little Flandre, like I do with my hunger before it consumes you completely. But don't worry; you won't have to worry about such things anymore. I'll pry all of your secrets open."

Meanwhile, Cirno had woken up enough to find herself propped up against one of the gloomy corridor's walls. She rubbed her weary eyes and pushed herself to her feet. It felt like she had just awoken from a deep but troubled sleep.

"Flandre?" was the first word that came out of her mouth.

"Mokou?" she tried, her anxiety growing by the second.

"Where are you?"

No answer greeted her and the ice fairy suddenly felt very alone and isolated in this strange environment. The pearl lighting illuminated her worried expression. Cirno was recklessly brave to a fault but without anyone to impress that fact upon, she often lost her way.

Surrounded by friends and rivals was the best way to live a rich and fulfilling life and it never hurt to have a friend watching over you when something went wrong. Flandre's presence was like a reassuringly warm glow, one that Cirno wanted very much to be reunited with as soon as possible.

The last thing that Cirno remembered was falling under the spell of that deceivingly beautiful lullaby and then... nothing but distraught

dreams. She glanced around her and almost jumped at her own shadow as it matched her movements.

Sighing, she looked around again for any sign or indication. A written message would've been nice and as it happened, Flandre had left a clear message in the form of a narrow hole of destruction that was still surrounded by the faint crackling of etheric force. Cirno smiled. How like Flandre to punctuate a simple message in the most eye-catching way possible.

Cirno happily skipped along, her previous worries all but forgotten. She ignored the many tempting doors and grand looking staircases and followed the small hollow cone through wall after wall until she came upon what looked like a crime scene. The wrecked door frame was empty and looked like a hungry mouth with splinters of unnatural looking wood standing in for teeth. She gulped and peered inside.

The room was a total mess, like a storm had tossed the contents around like a blender and collapsed the ceiling for good measure. Cirno cautiously tiptoed inside while taking care to step over any patches of debris and gazed up at the massive hole. Then she froze as she felt more than heard distributing sounds echoing down from the upper floor. She shuddered involuntarily as her soul recognized the all too familiar sensation of Yuyuko's frightening violations.

The room was flooded with shining blue light as Cirno immediately flew upwards on six clear crystal clear wings. The room and second floor passed by in a blur as she followed the source of that heart gripping wrongness. Concern and dismay wrapped themselves across Cirno's usually cheerful face as she saw Yuyuko crouching over a trembling Flandre.

"Hey, get away from her!" Cirno yelled before her feet even hit the ground. Her fists shook with anger and apprehension at whatever had happened. Flandre looked deathly pale and was covered with fluttering butterflies from head to toe. Yuyuko appeared to be talking to the crumpled girl but made no move to back away. She needed

help, her help and now! Cirno decided that she wouldn't ask a second time.

A sparkling stream of ice flew from Cirno's hands and stuck harmlessly against Yuyuko's pink, shimmering shield that manifested instantly out of thin air. It crackled and melted as the repellent energies reacted against the extreme cold. Yuyuko didn't even look in the fairy's direction as she tried not to let the little irritation distract her.

She tutted as the blue glow forced her to blink. Reluctantly, she decided to exert the minimum amount of her precious attention required and expanded her shield outwards so that it would collide and smash Cirno against her own icy hammer.

Cirno's vision was suddenly filled with a hurtling iceberg full of jagged and pointy overgrowths but she didn't let such a sight faze her even in the slightest. Deep down, she knew that she was a small fish in a big pond full of immensely powerful beings, many with outlandish powers but so what? That only made her want to prove herself even further and there was no way that she would allow one of her friends to be bullied by one such being with an inflated ego.

The immense ice ball smashed deep craters into the wooden flooring and sent sharp splinters and shards of ice into the walls. Each heavy bounce made Cirno's teeth chatter but she shook it off by clamping her mouth down as tightly as she could manage.

Her shining ice beam was still connected to the immense glacier which meant that she could still use her mastery over ice to manipulate it. The ice wailed like a vengeful spirit as it cracked and morphed into a large pair of hands that grabbed Yuyuko's shield and hoisted it up into the air.

Yuyuko gasped and tried to keep her balance but failed spectacularly as her elegant blue dress was flung up over her head as she toppled over inside her protective egg as it was smashed through the ceiling.

Cirno clapped her giant hands together in celebration, each oversized smack loud enough to wobble her footing before realization flashed across her face and she rushed over to Flandre's side. Her crystallized extra limbs crumbled like an overburdened snow covered archway.

Cirno saw the sinister glowing butterflies and her friend's pained expression and felt a knot inside her little chest. Flandre was a maddeningly powerful and confident companion, not this shuddering, vulnerable looking little girl.

"Flandre, Flandre!" she called but the only response she received was a series of strained moans and weak breaths. She almost bent down to shake the vampire's shoulders, almost brushed away her slick blonde hair to feel her temperature but hesitated when the phantom insects started to beat their wings angrily. Their luminous aura reflected brightly in her blue eyes. Cirno slapped her cheeks to rid herself of any indecision. This wasn't the time to be scared, not when someone needed her help.

"Snap out of it!" she said to herself and set to work carefully freezing the butterflies while avoiding any patches of exposed skin. Her magically infused ice was able to trap the ethereal beings within an icy prison. They dropped off Flandre and shone with displeasure at being deprived such a satisfying meal.

"You shouldn't act above your station!" came Yuyuko's distant, spooky voice from somewhere unseen.

Cirno's breath caught in her throat. She refused to look behind her and acknowledge whatever horrors Yuyuko had summoned from beyond the thin veil of life and death. Whenever she played hide and seek, looking at someone often felt like tempting fate. Instead, she looked at her friend and her heart was filled with sympathy.

Cirno tucked her slender arms underneath Flandre's shoulders and hoisted the vampire to her feet, after which Flandre practically slumped into the fairy's waiting arms. Had Cirno noticed the almost

dreamy way that Flandre hungrily stared at her neck, then perhaps she wouldn't have been so ready to help. Flandre's tongue lathered up the inside of her mouth. Her warm breath was ticklish and created clouds as it brushed up against Cirno's cold skin.

To an icy fairy like Cirno, Flandre's youthful frame was surprisingly heavy so she struggled a little under the scarlet sister's weight. Her clear, gleaming wings flickered with frost as she attempted to rise off the ground but Flandre frustrated her attempts by squeezing her tightly like a constricting snake.

"Come on," groaned Cirno. "You're not helping me."

Flandre's red eyes flickered with recognition. She could feel a healthy pulse beating against her soft cheek in a steady, mesmerizing rhythm. The flowing blood sounded as loud as a raging river. Flandre hissed, her fangs hanging dangerously close but she hesitated. Her temple throbbed as a distant voice screamed at her within her mind.

*What do you think you're doing! Do you want to be locked up again? Must I resort to such treatment with my own blood?*

Cirno heard the hiss and felt a single bead of wet saliva dribble down her neck. She nervously glanced behind her and almost jumped right out of her skin at the sight of a gaping maw of sharp teeth and two deep glowing pits of red that had the fairy firmly in their sights. A ravenous moan filled her ears like some kind of feral beast was hanging upon her back. That was all it took. Cirno screamed and tried to shake herself free of the fearsome embodiment of everything that went bump in the night but Flandre hung on as tightly as a limpet.

"Get off! Get off!" Cirno repeated frantically but try as she might, she couldn't pry the bloodsick little girl off her shoulders. Shaking her hips, leaning forwards, none of it worked. Every passing second, Cirno expected the deadly kiss of fangs against the soft, cool skin of her exposed neck.

In the end, it was a moot point as Yuyuko's butterflies sent both of them to their knees, reducing them to a pair of screaming children. Entwined in each others arms, they squirmed in torment but in a small act of mercy it didn't take very long until they passed out from any number of soul numbing violations.

Flandre couldn't say exactly how long she had been out for. Her arms ached with the kiss of cold steel and someone was talking nearby so she pried her straining eyes open to have a look around.

Surprisingly, the first thought that entered her mind was not that she appeared to be in a stereotypical dungeon complete with dripping, leaky stones and primitive looking torture devices, but rather if enough time had elapsed for the sun to rear it's shining face above the clouds. Passing out and dying to sunlight would have been such a pathetically laughable end.

*You're indoors, Flandre and sunlight wouldn't kill you outright so stop being silly and focus on what's important.*

"Such an uncreative lie," were the first words that she heard but she ignored them for the time being.

Flandre tried to push herself away from the soggy stone wall but found that she had been bound by metal restrains. Her arms hung uncomfortably above her in a tight vice that rubbed against pale skin. Her ankles were similarly wrapped.

"You Lunarians never did have much imagination," came the unmistakably carefree tone of Yuyuko. A short sharp smack soon followed which echoed in the cramped environment.

Flandre tensed as her body remembered all the pain and suffering that it had endured as a result of that misleadingly whimsical voice. Adrenaline mixed with apprehension flooded her system. She fought against her restraints but found that she couldn't break the simple rusty material. Defeated for now and entirely at her nemesis' mercy,

she would at least look the otherworldly princess in the eye and show her that she wasn't afraid.

The sight of Yuyuko strung up alongside her was certainly not the sight she was expecting but celebrations would have to wait until later as one threat had been replaced with another. Kaguya pointed at Yuyuko with her glowing wand. With all it's colours, it still looked like the snapped off branch of a Christmas tree.

Kaguya herself looked a lot more ladylike now that she had changed into a beautiful, hanging oriental dress instead of bloody, tattered rags. Eirin stood attentively at her princess' side, entirely expressionless.

"Hey, Flandre! You're finally awake!" said Cirno. "I'm so-"

"Silence!" snapped Eirin who wagged her index finger. "It isn't your place to speak. That will come later."

Flandre gasped and looked around to see Cirno's hopeful face staring right back at her. The ice fairy had been strung up in exactly the same way. That made three captives completely under Kaguya's mercy, with Flandre right in the middle.

Flandre smiled and nodded reassuringly at Cirno, the comforting sight of which gave her new found determination to save the both of them from whatever fate awaited them. As covertly as she could manage, she flexed her muscles and pulled against her bonds but the rusty metal wouldn't yield.

*These cursed restrains! What's wrong with me? I cannot detect the faintest hint of magic in these simple binds, and yet why can't I break them?*

"Oh, looks likes your little accomplish has finally woken up," said Kaguya as she grabbed Yuyuko's chin and squeezed while regarding Flandre like a butcher eyeing up another choice cut of meat. "Maybe she'll provide some more promising answers."

Yuyuko looked indignant as she tried to mumble through closed fingers. Kaguya pretended not to listen as she took great pleasure in pressing Yuyuko's cheeks together and swinging her face from side to side like a baby.

"Are you upset, corpse princess?" Kaguya spat through clenched teeth as she yanked down hard. Even through the flowing pink hair, Flandre could see the storm-clouds forming behind Yuyuko's mask of refinement. It must have been a bitter pill to swallow for one with such an inflated sense of self importance to be toyed with in such a manner and Flandre enjoyed the dressing down immensely.

Eirin couldn't hide the slightest hint of a smirk that grew across her lips at this humiliating treatment.

"And what are you so happy about?" Kaguya asked as she stepped right in front of Flandre and fixed her with a piecing stare. "You're not among friends here, little girl. Did you think that you could trash my home without any consequences?"

"I was only defending myself," said Flandre. "And the only reason I was in your home to begin with was because I was poisoned by that nurse standing to your side." Just looking at Eirin made Flandre's blood boil. Kaguya held her sleeve up over her mouth and scoffed at the very notion.

"Did you hear that, Eirin? This girl has the gall to blame you for her crimes."

Eirin shook her head, the constellations etched into her blue red dress sparkling in the sparse lighting. "Truly shameless, but sadly not unexpected. The kind of fools that allow themselves to be manipulated by Yukari and her minions are beyond hope. Perhaps your little fairy shouldn't have insulted the princess after she decided to grace you with her history?"

"Yes," added Kaguya. "And not only that, but you allowed that wandering peasant Mokou inside these hallowed walls. Now, who



should we start with I wonder?" She giggled that haughty way only a pampered, high class woman could manage and glanced at Eirin.  
"What do you think?"

Eirin's grey eyes didn't waste any time in turning towards Yuyuko. Flandre could see real enmity in that cold stare; clearly there was no love lost between these two.

"Since we've been so graciously honoured with Yuyuko's presence, we shouldn't be rude and keep her waiting any further."

Eirin produced a small rectangular metallic box and walked towards the now visibly unnerved lady. Kaguya clapped her hands together joyfully and strutted over with great interest, her long black hair flowing behind her. "Yes, we shouldn't squander this chance for such a lovely reunion with our dear agent of justice. Tell me, Yuyuko? Did you enjoy foiling my plans with so many of your companions? Was it fun?"

She looked around woefully at the otherwise damp and empty dungeon with a finger under her chin. "Oh, sadly it seems you're all alone this time. How brave are you without the little gardener at your side? Without that infant shrine maiden? Without the upstart vampire and pocket watch maid?"

A spark of anger flashed through Flandre as she realized that it was her sister being mentioned in such a derogatory manner but squashed that nagging feeling into a little ball to be released at a more appropriate time later; a skill that been employed many times over the long years.

*So this so called princess was the one that stole the moon. The one that prompted sister and Sakuya to leave the mansion that one time.*

The small box clipped open, the sudden snap making Yuyuko flinch despite herself. She stared wide eyed as a sharp, gleaming pair of scissors was held up before her like destiny made manifest. Burning lamp light reflected off the immaculately polished material. Eirin

closed the blades rapidly, the soft ripples of air brushing against her face in a most pleasing way.

"Harming me wouldn't be in your best interests," said Yuyuko who still managed to keep her voice level and speak with an air of authority, even if she couldn't tear her uncertain gaze away from the shining twin blades. "You should know what will happen if you harm me; Yukari will know who is responsible and you are well within her reach."

"Who said anything about harming you? said Kaguya, her cheshire cat grin widening. "What do you take us for? Barbarians?"

Yuyuko watched as Eirin's immaculate hands closed in around her face; the scissors edging closer and closer. The cold blades brushed up against her cheek, the metal travelling across the contours of her face, the sharp edges prickling her skin. Yuyuko couldn't help but close her eyes but at least the whimper died in her throat. The blades entwined themselves in hair and snapped close.

*Snip, snip, snip* was all Flandre heard as a rain of pink hair drifted downwards much like the petals of a cherry blossom tree. The dungeon floor was soon littered with rose coloured strands. It seemed wrong for such beautiful hair to lay forgotten and trampled against the dirty stone.

"No, no! What do you think you're doing?" Yuyuko wailed as she struggled against her chains. "Stop that at once!"

*Snip, snip, snip.*

"They often say that a woman's life resides in her hair," replied Kaguya. "How can someone call themselves a refined lady without a head of well tripped, luscious hair?"

Kaguya ran a hand through her shining, impossibly long black hair that was darker than night itself and stretched all the way down to her knees.

"A true exquisite beauty can entrance and bewitch with a simple brush of her hair. That's what I've decided to take away from you; your punishment Yuyuko."

"These scissors are special," remarked Eirin as she clipped away diligently. "Just a little something that I improvised just for you. Hair will not regrow wherever I cut, like salting the earth. I'm sealing away what little charm and dignity you possessed, much like the princess so elegantly put into words. I wonder just how inventive you and Yukari can be? Can you undo my handiwork, I wonder?"

"Please, please stop this!" Yuyuko cried, her resolve whittling away along with her hair. Kaguya chuckled, relishing the sight of one of her former adversaries reduced to such a sorry state. Yuyuko squirmed but couldn't get away. She was trapped, a captive to her own humiliation. And at the hands of Lunarians, no less!

"Don't struggle," Eirin suggested. "I might just slip and break skin, accidentally of course."

Finally, she reached breaking point and resorted to something that she was loath to do. Ask for help.

"Yukari!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. "Yukari! Please, save me!"

The dungeon immediately became several shades darker as a boundary opened up beneath Eirin's feet. Flandre once again saw a twisted dimension full of giant eyeballs with piecing gazes and twisted concepts where nothing made sense and closed her eyes, not wanting to be reminded that such a place existed.

Shadows appeared where they had no right to be and all the candles flickered out and died despite the total lack of wind. Kaguya pulled Eirin back before she was swallowed up by the possibly bottomless pit. The scissors fell from her hand into a place where they might be falling until the end of eternity.

Ran emerged from the portal, her entrance a burst of golden colour as her silky nine tails clashed with the otherwise miserable, dank dungeon. Her hands flashed once and the shackles popped open, the metal cleaved cleanly in two. Yuyuko fell into her arms and they both dropped back into the shifting portal and disappeared before anybody could stop them. No one spoke for a few moments as astonishment and surprise gripped the onlookers until Kaguya broke the lingering silence.

"How did that gap demon manage to defile the sanctity of my home!?" Kaguya demanded. "That shouldn't be possible! Eirin, how did you let this happen?"

"It must have been Yuyuko's presence, acting as a beacon. It shouldn't have-"

"Well, it did happen!" Kaguya stamped her foot against the stone floor again and again, her princess act thrown away in the midst of an almighty tempter tantrum. She paced up and down, using very unladylike language as she kicked over a torture rack in an explosive release of frustration.

She brooded on matters as she twisted her black hair around one of her fingers. Eirin knew better than to interfere during one of her princess' bouts of anger and patiently waited. Eventually Kaguya calmed down and glared at her two remaining prisoners, eager to vent her grievances on something living.

"Well, at least I still have you two."

## Trial by Fire

"We never meant for any of this to happen," said Flandre earnestly as she finished her explanation that sounded very much like a plea of 'not guilty'.

"We were blackmailed! Forced! Coerced!"

Flandre fought down the bile that rose within her throat at having to placate this spoiled bitch of a princess but it certainly wasn't the worse thing that she had been subjected to tonight and probably wouldn't be the last by the time daylight reared its ugly head over the horizon.

"That's the truth, honest!" exclaimed Cirno.

"I'll decide what's truth here, fairy," replied Kaguya who was still fuming furiously just under the surface. "And if you'll be walking out of this in one piece, assuming of course that you're still capable of walking that is."

Still, Flandre's words had tempered Kaguya's fury, if only a little. The mention of Yukari's involvement gave her pause and the vampire's story did seem plausible, if a little self serving in the way that it completely absolved her and the fairy of all possible guilt. And they were guilty, without a shadow of a doubt. Intruding on her soil with the wandering tramp in tow and defacing a princess' home?

*I'm completely innocent! It was all Yukari's fault, honest!*

The words made Kaguya's forehead throb with annoyance; mostly because she was inclined to believe it. That excuse had been used many times and was often true. Yukari always did prefer to manipulate pawns to do her bidding rather than handling things directly. The mistress of boundaries was certainly powerful enough,

that much Kaguya was certain but she suspected that Yukari derived some kind of mischievous pleasure from plotting and scheming.

Kaguya understood, because she was much the same. When you were for all intents and purposes all powerful and immortal then life can become quite boring all of a sudden. Challenge and struggle are like walking and breathing, essential for life.

She paced up and down in front of her two remaining captives, thinking. Flandre just hoped that it didn't involve dreaming up cruel and inventive ways to torture the two of them.

Likewise, Cirno was wondering the exact same thing in her own little way. Trapped in her shackles, she looked down and wiggled her toes as she imagined that meanie nurse tickling her soft, defenceless feet with fluffy feathers. Eirin's sadistic grin as she playfully teased Cirno's sensitive skin almost sent the ice fairy into convolutions.

"Cirno," Flandre whispered. "Settle down."

*Just keep those inbreds happy while I break out of these stupid restraints!*

As silently as she could manage, Flandre gently pushed her back against the dungeon wall. Her beautiful wingtips (which by this time had regained a little of their former splendour) scrapped against the wet, foul sludge on the wall and she almost yelped at the sickening feeling that took hold.

Next, she wrapped her nimble fingers around the rusty metal rings and pulled. They didn't even budge an inch. A sinking feeling of disappointment bubbled up inside her bosom.

*Why? How did Ran so effortlessly break them when I cannot? It isn't possible for some simple restraint to hold back my power! There must be a trick to it; there must!*

Not even her trusted blade Lavateinn would respond to her call.

"You, the vampire!" snapped Kaguya. Flandre froze, her beating heart hammering against her ribcage as she wondered if the game was up.

"Y-yes?" Flandre answered sheepishly.

"Do you take me for a fool, vampire?"

Flandre blinked, unsure of just how honest her response should be.

*Uhh... yes?*

"No, of course not. I never wanted any part of this from the beginning."

"Yeah," chimed in Cirno happily. "I don't think you're all that stupid either!"

"Silence, fairy," ordered Eirin. "The princess wasn't addressing you, so kindly remain silent otherwise I'll stitch those lips together with steaming lace."

Kaguya quietly fumed under the surface. Without Eirin's intervention nipping her temper in the bud like that, then things might have turned out far worse but Flandre was thankful when the questioning resumed after only a few mean-spirited glares in the fairy's direction.

"You mentioned the sunstone earlier, but I suppose someone of your standing would have no understanding of it's importance, am I right?"

Once again, Flandre felt like her beloved sister's good name was being besmirched. She wore the proud name of Scarlet and held it in very high regard. A hint of defiance crept into her voice.

"Why should I care what it is? As I said before over and over again, I don't care what it does."

"Oh, you seem upset? Is my hospitality not good enough for you?" Kaguya prodded the air between them with her twisted wand.

"At least Yukari let me sit down," replied Flandre as she tried to search within herself for something that would snap this accursed metal.

Kaguya smiled and indicated a particularly painful looking black chair with small spikes across its surface. "The iron chair, I believe?"

She glanced back at Eirin who nodded approvingly.

"Good," said Kaguya. "Well, any takers?"

Flandre shook her head while using the motion to mask her attempts at breaking free while Cirno squirmed uncomfortably as she recalled a particular prank involving brambles and musical chairs. She had been the perpetrator of course, but still... the memory stung all the same.

"No? Well, how about another question? Where are the other two pieces? Does Yukari already have them? Did you happen to see them at her manor?"

"Other pieces?" asked Cirno. "It didn't look like much of a puzzle to me."

"Yeah," added Flandre. "That old gezzar only had the sunstone on him. Nothing else."

Kaguya sighed. She walked over to the iron chair with slow, measured steps and prodded the spikes with an immaculate finger, the kind attained by a lifetime of pampering.

"Eirin," Kaguya ordered. "Please enlighten our ignorant prisoners as it seems they know even less than that clueless winged bimbo of a Valkyrie."



Eirin bowed her head ever so slightly, the constellations embedded in her nurse's cap glittering as she did so like an optical illusion. They reminded Cirno of the outside sky and served to fuel her desire to get out of this sewer pit. For once she hoped that Flandre snapped and blew up the whole place.

"Very well, Princess. The three stones, or more accurately, machine pieces are named after the sun, moon and stars. Together, they make up the solar compass which has the ability to navigate the boundary separating Gensokyo from the human world. Legend has it that the name comes from the way that the creator would gaze up at the sky forlornly and yearn for days long since past."

"Not all Youkai were content to live relatively simple lives inside the confines of this pleasant but ultimately fabricated wonderland. Some of them expressed horror at the realization that they had become mere window dressing where as before they had been feared, loved and even worshipped. Shrines were built in their honour and stories were passed between generations to the point in which some Youkai became legends and even ascended to godhood. Without the kind of faith that could be attained in the human world, Gensokyo ensured that those lesser entities would remain at the bottom, permanently, and never blossom into higher plains of existence."

"Others didn't quite realize how much of a shock it would be to suddenly become removed from all the rituals, superstitions and companionship that they had developed over the years and became starved of attention. Some of them felt cheated and tried to leave forcibly but none could bridge the gap between dimensions. Yukari's realm is seemingly endless and trying to understand it is a fools errand however with all the accumulated knowledge cramped up all together in Gensokyo, it didn't take long for means, magical or otherwise to replicate a key or find some other kind of loophole."

"Nearly all of them failed of course but the solar compass was one of the more famous attempts that actually worked. Of course, they didn't stop to consider the consequences of entering a realm that was completely governed by another. As things turned out, Yukari

simply ejected the escapee right outside the Hakurei shrine and let the current shrine maiden handle things swiftly and decisively. When it became apparent that entering the border realm meant throwing yourself at Yukari's mercy, many simply gave up completely."

Eirin, who always enjoyed the chance to impress her wealth of knowledge upon others, continued her tale as efficiently as a schoolteacher.

"As to what happened to the compass? I would assume that since it wasn't destroyed, it must have been intentionally split up and thrown back into the boundaries, perhaps as one last ditch act of defiance or maybe it simply became lost in transit. Those pieces drifted in the ether, lost but not forgotten and eventually rode the imaginary currents back into Gensokyo and became scattered across the land in much the same way as those unfortunate humans that occasionally stumble into our domain, seemingly from nowhere."

Kaguya groaned and shook her head. "Yes, thank you Eirin for that in-depth history lesson. Now, did that loosen any tongues, I wonder?"

"Wow," Cirno breathed. "That sounds amazing! Doesn't it, Flan?"

"Yeah," Flandre agreed.

*With that, I could definitely, totally meet Reimu again and at the Hakurei shrine no less! And the human world! It's been so long, I bet it's completely different from what I remember it as and Sister wouldn't be able to deny me this time!*

"Well?" Kaguya asked rather impatiently. "Why show Yukari any loyalty? Tell me where the other pieces are, right now!"

Flandre almost blurted out that she didn't have them and even if she had seen the other pieces, she wouldn't have even realized it. But that wouldn't have been very smart since that information might be

the only thing keeping the temperamental princess from boiling over completely.

"Well, we don't have 'em," Cirno said, the words almost reaching out and physically slapping Flandre across the face.

"Wait, that isn't-" Flandre began.

*Cirno, you idiot!*

"Finally, some honesty. Well, lets move on to other matters," Kaguya said.

"Tewi?"

A sly giggling filled the gloomy dungeon. A high pitched laugh that was easily more irritating than a few dozen cats meowing for food. Tewi happily leapt from behind Eirin, proudly announcing her presence for all to see like it was some grand occasion however nobody else seemed quite as excited as the little bunny girl was herself.

"It's me, Tewi ! Your ever loyal vassal, friend and trusted confidant!"

She did a little twirl while wiggling her fluffy white tail and jumped up and down excitedly until Eirin walked up behind her and lightly but firmly flicked one of her long ears with a sharp sounding twang.

"Stop that this instant!" Eirin snapped. "We have outsiders present. Please, at least pretend to follow the proper etiquette."

Tewi grumbled and rubbed her stinging ear but when she and Flandre locked eyes, her expression changed into one of dark mischief. Her grinning smile suddenly took on a more sinister quality, like someone had just flipped a switch marked 'evil'.

"So since I was busy with the tramp yet again, tell me in more detail exactly what these two were up too," asked Kaguya.

Tewi then proceeded to exaggerate and downright lie just up to the point of plausibility and enjoyed every damn second of it. If embellishing the truth was a sport, then Tewi would get the gold every time. Eirin looked particularly murderous when the words 'laboratory' and 'inferno' were brought up in the same sentence.

Flandre could almost feel the atmosphere growing more hostile with every passing word. The two restrained girls were facing execution and the star witness was a compulsive fibber.

"That's stupid! Liar! Liar! Liar!" Cirno yelled as she frantically flipped around in her restraints with the fury of bottled wildfire. Flandre was much too astonished to even be angry.

"She's obviously lying! Firstly, Mokou was the one who set the house on fire, Yuyuko didn't strike a deal with me and I definitely didn't use... that word to describe Eirin. I don't even know what it means! That oversized furball is just pissed off about being tied up which wasn't even me!"

"Yeah, she's a stupid head!" complained Cirno. "Even her name sounds like the word lie!"

Tewi stuck her tongue out at Cirno and made a hand gesture that Flandre had copied one time from a book and had been promptly sent to bed without supper by a very displeased Sakuya.

"That's enough," said Kaguya who rubbed her pale forehead. "I'm bored with this interrogation. I was intrigued for the briefest of moments but it seems that you're little more than Yukari's lackeys. Well, do you want to say something to me? Perhaps an apology? Grovel on the floor and maybe I'll forgive you."

Flandre snorted, finding the idea laughable. She was so tired of playing the fool.

"Remove these shackles and I'll gladly repay you."

Cirno nudged Flandre right in the ribs with an icy touch that took some of the vampire's breath away.

"Hey," she whispered, echoing Flandre's earlier sentiment. "What happened to settling down?"

Kaguya chuckled and casually strode up to her captive who met the Lunarian's piecing gaze without even batting an eyelid. She held up her twisted wand and pointed it directly at Flandre's snarling face. The bright rainbow of colours glittered across her skin like the strobing lights of a spinning disco ball.

"You're like a fly caught in my web, little girl. You should choose your words more carefully. Eirin here is a unparalleled genius when it comes to prolonging someone's life, or suffering if I'm a little too clumsy. Like this, for instance!"

Kaguya only had to give the faintest touch of her wand's branches against Flandre's chest for it to send maddening waves of agony coursing throughout her body. Flandre screamed loud enough to shake the rafters and thrashed against her shackles hard enough to draw blood.

The intense flashing lights and sounds suggested that Flandre was being electrocuted but in fact it felt far worse than that. Being entirely enveloped in stinging nettles while simultaneously being whipped with thorn bushes was as close as you could get to describing it.

"Stop it!" Cirno pleaded. "You're hurting her! Please, stop it!" Tears began to stream down her face. Slowly at first but soon enough Cirno was crying enough for the water to freeze two frozen rivers down her pale cheeks.

Kaguya was taken aback by such a fervent display of anguish. She was used to proud rebellion, not this, not heartfelt honesty. She tried to withdraw her wand but instead found that she couldn't. Confused, she looked up to find that Flandre had grasped the glowing wand in her taloned hand.

The exiled princess huffed and pulled more forcefully this time but it was too late to save it from Flandre's destructive talents who crushed it in a shower of splinters. The air viably crackled with released magic that without a home, fizzled out and died like burning fireflies.

Kaguya grunted as she hit the floor on her royal behind. Her wand that had been carved from the oldest tree on the moon and had been a treasured family heirloom now lay cruelly strewn across the floor. The possession that most reminded her of home, of family had been totally destroyed. Not even Mokou had managed that in their long, seemingly eternal feud.

Eirin was too horrified to even utter a single word. She knew how important that wand was to her princess and that it was practically impossible for someone without Lunarian knowledge to destroy it. Her limbs felt heavy, her lips dry as she watched her princess crawl across the dirty stone floor and snatch up the remains of her great wand in trembling fingers. Eirin would have given much to suffer the shame in Kaguya's stead rather than watch such a scene unfold.

"My precious wand!" moaned a grief stricken Kaguya. On the floor, she looked like a beggar as she pathetically tried to fiddle the pieces of her heirloom back together. Then she started to cry tears of spiteful anger and Flandre knew that she had a very short window to escape her bonds before things turned very sour indeed but thankfully she had been gifted two very important clues. Clues that had been bought with pain and suffering, but clues nonetheless.

The first was that during the excruciating torture, Flandre's mind had been brimming with intense pain and all she could think about was the overwhelming desire to escape the hot needle. The second had been a gasp of surprise when she had lost control of herself and crushed the wand, a voice that Flandre recognized and who wasn't currently present in the dungeon.

Flandre closed her eyes and tried to attain a state of inner peace and tranquillity while pushing out all the highly charged voices and

emotions surrounding her, both outside and within. It was a skill that she used to fight her own inner demons on occasion, a lesson that Remilia had painstakingly imparted upon her.

Flandre remembered cowering in her older sister's arms, horrified and disappointed in herself while Remilia calmly and lovingly stroked her soft blonde hair and sung her a lullaby while assuring Flandre that she would never abandon her troublesome little sister.

Flandre pictured that memory and held onto it for all she was worth as she gently but deliberately pulled against her chafing restrains. The metal groaned and creaked under the strain as stone rubble tumbled down her back like a hundred crawling spiders but Flandre didn't care. She was past caring. If she could conquer herself, then a few stones weren't going to bother her one little bit.

"Kill that one," Kaguya wailed, pointing. "I want that vampire dead!"

*Snap!*

Flandre's heart fluttered as she finally freed herself from those dreadful restrains. With all of her boundless strength and power restored, the simple rusty metal might as well be mere paper. Limp chains hit the ground in a series of loud clangs.

*The shackles weren't magical at all, I was just forced to believe that I was powerless. That's why Ran was able to break them so easily!*

Reisen Udongein Inaba stood trembling at the back of the dungeon, her mental manipulation no longer concealing her from view. Her pulsing pink eyes shimmered like a deep, rose coloured ocean as they once again tried to work their enchanting magic over Flandre but she purposely looked away from the hypnotic display, lest she fall under it's spell.

"Please, please," Reisen whispered to herself as she attempted to regain control. "Please, look at me."

She was desperate to avoid the painful implications of failure. Eirin had already tied her up tonight for not selling enough at the market and who knows what fate might await her with the princess in such a sorry state. Reisen's knees were buckling at that very scary thought.

However Flandre had other ideas. She flexed her hand and summoned a steam of volatile energy that crackled towards Reisen like a horizontal bolt of lightening. The Luna bunny smiled grimly at her horrible luck.

The light from her own eyes was eclipsed by that of her impending doom. The dungeon shook with the explosion and Reisen was propelled with a smoking trail right into a overhanging series of chains that rattled above like crying spirits.

"The prisoners are escaping!" Eirin yelled as her shining bow materialized in her hands.

Tewi gulped as she was suddenly face to face with an extremely annoyed Flandre.

"Listen, I-" she began before Flandre savagely backhanded her with a satisfyingly loud crunch.

*That'll teach you, swindler!*

Before Kaguya released what was happening, Flandre had snatched up the princess and pinned her arms up behind her back. Eirin drew back her quivering bow string and held the deadly shining arrow at the ready. Flandre knew from experience that the arrowhead promised a slow numbing torment.

"What're you doing! Unhand me you mongrel!" exclaimed Kaguya.

"Release the princess, at once!" Eirin commanded.

"I don't think so," said Flandre. She slid a taloned hand underneath Kaguya's neck and clutched her chin tightly. "How about you drop



the bow before I release my pent up anger on this precious little wall flower here. You can start by releasing my friend."

She breathed menacingly against Kaguya's exposed neck and wondered just what a Lunarean tasted like.

*Sister always compared aristocratic blood to fine wine.*

Eirin's gleaming bow wavered in indecision. Kaguya laughed bitterly at the implied threat.

"I'm immortal, you simple minded fool."

"So what?" Flandre said as she reached down and snapped one of Kaguya's delicate fingers.

*I know how these high-born arrogant types think.*

"So you wouldn't mind me sampling your delectable blood?" Flandre whispered. "Mixing in a lifetimes worth of bloodlines into your own noble lineage. It would be a taint that would stay with you forever, no matter how hard you scrub. Then you'll be the true mongrel."

That seemed to do the trick. Kaguya dropped the haughty attitude and shuddered at the very suggestion of someone violating her esteemed lineage.

"Eirin!" she called out. "Shoot me! Shoot me right this instant! Kill us both!"

"B-but I-" Eirin began, the thought of willingly harming her princess almost making her physically sick.

"I'm ordering you to do it!" screamed Kaguya who began to struggle with renewed vigour.

"Are you out of your mind?" exclaimed Flandre as she watched the sharp arrow point intently and wondered whether she was fast enough to release the hysterical princess at the last second to avoid

a nasty skewering. Eirin's internal struggle was evident in the way that her weapon wavered but Flandre saw in her determined gaze that she had finally come to a decision.

Eirin had watched over Kaguya for so very long that she couldn't bare to see her cherished princess harmed by her own hand. She looked away and made to release her arrow but found that she couldn't. Flandre watched as a breezy whooshing ray of ice glued the surprised doctor's fingers to her arrow. Cirno had somehow freed herself and was in the process of freezing Eirin into a snow woman.

Eirin winced at the intense cold which was strong enough for her to loose all the feeling in her hands. Her bow fell from frostbitten fingers and faded away into humming strands of glittering blue. Despite the fact that the frigid crystalline structure was rapidly spreading across her body, Eirin was glad that she had been spared such a loathsome duty.

"Eirin!" Kaguya yelled.

"No need for that," said Cirno, who grinned at Flandre.

"How did you get out?" asked Flandre incredulously. "If you could do that, then why didn't you do it sooner?"

"Hey, calm down, Flan. I was breathing icy breath on those shackles all this time. Pretty smart, huh? Though, my wrists kinda hurt."

Flandre smiled.

*That fairy can be pretty cunning, some of the time.*

"You'll never get away with this," said Kaguya. Her lavish dress began to flutter as faint Lunarian runes appeared in the air. They pulsed with pale light, the runes forming a complex language much older than Gensokyo itself.

"Stop that," threatened Flandre nonchalantly as she tickled Kaguya's neck with her razor sharp fangs. Flandre seemed utterly unconcerned even with the throbbing lettering surrounding her.

"You'd better listen," teased Cirno. "Unless you want Flandre to kiss you, pervert."

"I wasn't going to kiss her," Flandre snapped. "But I will drain you like a sponge if you keep it up, Princess."

"Plus, you'll explode all your friends," added Cirno.

Kaguya was almost outraged enough to let her spell go and damn the consequences, almost. These fools didn't even deserve to breathe in the same air as someone of her standing and yet here she was, reduced to a prisoner in her own home. Reluctantly, she banished the runes back to the moon's vast library from which they came.

Cirno nodded smugly and kicked Kaguya right in the royal shins which produced a satisfying gasp of pain.

"That's for being such a stick in the mud."

Flandre grinned approvingly.

"Now, apologise," she demanded. "Politely."

"Yeah," said Cirno. "Nice and refined, like a princess. Put that fancy education to good use!"

Kaguya's face turned beet red. Her lips quivered as the words flashed through her mind. Apologise? Her? She hadn't apologised to avoid banishment and certainly wouldn't do so now. She'd rather die than tarnish her honour and had done so on a few occasions. What was a single life to an immortal?

"Not happening," said Kaguya. "Not happening! Not happening! If you stick those disgusting fangs in me, then'll I'll scream!"

"Don't be such a cry baby," remarked Cirno, sneering.

A distant muted bang caused rubble to dance around on the stone floor. Then again, closer this time. Whatever force was approaching, the grating call of collapsing walls and loud impacts suggested something explosively dangerous.

"W-what's-" Flandre began, her voice shuddering.

The temperature immediately hurtled into the sweltering range like the dungeon had just been plunged into a giant furnace.

Cirno's wings started to drip and she stumbled as powerful heat waves assaulted her like a battering ram. Cirno never did like the summer months. She always took it personally that mighty mother nature would create something so unpleasant that was aimed squarely at ruining the fun of one lonesome little ice fairy.

The stonewall expanded outwards as the heat cooked brick and mortar until the pressure built up to unbearable levels. Flandre covered her face as the wall exploded outwards spectacularly. Most of the stonework was instantly vaporized from existence but those chunks large enough to escape total annihilation slammed and obliterated many of the torture devices and scattered them like dust in the wind.

Cirno dived for cover while Flandre tightened her grip on Kaguya and used her as a living shield.

"Settle down," said Flandre, her voice hoarse from the heat. "If you're immortal, then you've nothing to worry about."

"This is so humiliating," Kaguya snarled through gritted teeth. Everyone closed their eyes to escape blindness as the firestorm continued its rampage.

Reisen whimpered as several angry looking fireballs passed by close enough to singe her long bunny ears. She tried to pull her legs in but

her frantic struggles only succeeded in entangling herself even further in the overhanging chains. The hoarfrost surrounding Eirin began to melt, the constellations embedded in her clothing glittered from both the bright flames and freezing ice.

Mokou stood in the gaping opening, her stern expression matching the flickering blaze that backlit her dramatic entrance. Flames licked against her body but like a vengeful phoenix risen back from the ashes, she seemed right at home at the heart of the roasting inferno, like she was born from it.

Her clothing had seen better days. It was torn, blackened in places and covered in fresh, glistening blood, like she had died in it. Flandre licked her lips and looked down at the open neck before her.

*Temptations, temptations...*

"Mokou," Flandre said cautiously. The vampire couldn't tell if this was a clumsy rescue or an attempted mass murder complete with cremation.

"Hey," said Mokou, her hair flowing around her like sliver fire. "Thought you might need some help. Thought, anyway."

"Turn down the heat!" Cirno yelled, pumping her fists. "I'm melting over here!"

Cirno was hugging herself in a protective crouch. Steam surrounded her and a large pool of bubbling water had formed around the ice fairy's legs. Her six icy wings had grown so thin that they were practically transparent.

"Fine," Mokou groaned and the temperature settled down from the roasting surface of the sun to merely unpleasant and stuffy.

Mokou looked at her assembled Luna enemies and their various fates and almost laughed her lungs out.

"Oh, this is too much. How the mighty have fallen, huh? Bitch Princess? You couldn't even handle a few little pipsqueaks with your entire loser brigade to help? This is hilarious, totally hilarious!"

"Hey," Flandre objected.

Mokou folded her arms. "I'm almost embarrassed to call you a rival."

Kaguya glowered back at her with concentrated hate strong enough to strip paint.

"You flatter yourself, Mokou. The only rivalry you have is with the dirt under my heel, and you're losing."

Mokou grinned entirely without humour.

The great burning pillars that foreshadowed her seemed to share their makers mood and hissed angrily with great bouts of fire.

"Push the much honoured Princess over in the corner there," she said to Flandre who after some consideration obliged and shoved Kaguya discourteously onto the floor. In the palm of Mokou's hand was blue fire so dark that the space around it seemed to collapse and bend in on itself. Mokou shut her mouth tightly, otherwise the hungry flame would happily consume all the oxygen inside her lungs. Kaguya was bathed in the blue-black glow, her mouth set.

"You only kill me out of jealousy, Mokou. You and your ilk never did have much class. And you," Kaguya said as she looked at Flandre.

"I'll see you again. I have all the time in the world."

*We'll see.*

Flandre quickly hurried Cirno out of the dungeon and through the burning tunnel. She knew what was coming and wanted to spare Cirno the sight and sickening smell of cooking flesh.

Mokou immolated Kaguya until her bones were reduced to blackened ash. She savoured every tortured scream like it was music to her ears. So consumed was she in her grisly work, and so bright was the firestorm that she didn't notice Eirin's shining bow as it was levelled at her back.

## Moonscape

Flandre walked outside and sucked in a great lungful of fresh air. The starry night sky was beautiful but seemed even more sublime after having been locked up in that disgusting dungeon for so long.

Thankfully, the illuminating daylight was nowhere in sight, a fact that made Flandre immensely grateful. The night still reigned supreme. Behind her, the crackling of burning bamboo could be heard along with the chirping insects.

The tunnel that Mokou had forged from magical flame still smouldered faintly. It looked like a black mark, an affront to the uniformed beauty of Kaguya's residence.

The slit windows still shone with that peculiar light that so perfectly mimicked the moon. Flandre looked away from the mockery of moonlight. She longed for that familiar glow of lantern light provided by the scarlet devil mansion.

Flandre had never imagined that Gensokyo was such a wonderland where you could simply fly over a hill and jump into a completely different world altogether. Still, the memories that she had forged this night would stay with her forever. No longer was the outside world a distant stranger but now seemed more like a crazy popup picture book that followed no rhyme nor reason.

Cirno frantically waved her arms around in celebration while proudly proclaiming her triumphant return just in case Flandre missed it. The local wildlife didn't seem particularly impressed but Cirno was much too excited to notice.

Did it seem colder than usual? Flandre couldn't tell and frankly she didn't care. She was free again with her friend and that's all that mattered.



"It's it great, Flandre?" she asked, her blue eyes sparkling with happiness. A whirlpool of icicles circled around Cirno's smiling head as she danced around like a lunatic, her unrestrained power manifesting itself like a mirror of her emotions.

"Yeah," Flandre agreed as she stretched her aching back. "Feels good to be free again." She watched the surrounding bamboo suspiciously for any more Lunarians or any other kind of unexpected surprises.

"Hey, Flandre!" Cirno said as she cheerfully grasped the vampire's hands. Flandre flinched at this earnest display of affection.

"Your wings are glowing again! I was so worried when those butterflies sucked the life out of you. You looked so pale and alone, curled up on the floor like that."

Flandre could feel herself blushing. She could only imagine the embarrassed expression that she was making and tried to look away but Cirno held on to her tightly with chilly fingers.

"I hate what that creepy Yuyuko did to you. Are you sure you're alright?"

Flandre mumbled something under her breath and gently pushed herself away from Cirno's embrace. "I'm fine, so don't worry so much about me."

Cirno took a break from her jubilant antics to glance at Flandre's wings. They had been so deathly devoid of their usual colour that the little ice fairy had feared the worst but now the crystals glittered enticingly.

A little less vibrant perhaps but still, most jewellery wished that it could be only half as breathtaking. Cirno had always wanted to wear something expensive to show off to the other forest denizens. Everyone would be green with envy and see the little ice fairy in an

entirely different light altogether. Rumia and the others would never call her immature ever again.

"Hey," Cirno asked, her fickle nature changing topics at a whim. "Do those crystal wings grow back?"

"I said stop worrying about- wait, what?"

"Your wing crystals? Do they grow back? Do you think that I could have one or two?"

Flandre was aghast at the idea and her expression showed it. Subconsciously, her wings folded themselves protectively behind her back. She hated being scrutinized, especially when it came to her unusual wings.

*Sister always said that those who mocked them were they themselves jealous of the beautiful jewels gleaming with my own fiery spirit. One time, when I was crying in her arms, she calmly told me to ignore the mindless babble of bleating sheep. They would never be anything other than normal while I had supposedly been blessed with many gifts.*

Not waiting for an answer, Cirno reached out and tried to touch one of the glowing crystals, the one that looked like summer amber. Her skin tingled as her fingers approached the mesmerizing material.

Those bewitching jewels were almost in reach but at the last moment, Flandre backed away like she had been stung by a buzzing bee. Cirno watched the dangling gemstones forlornly, her hand slowly opening and closing as it remembered that brief, electrifying sensation.

"W-what are you doing!" Flandre exclaimed. "Nobody touches my delicate wings without my express permission!"

*That snowball head! Just because we're friends, she thinks she can touch me wherever she pleases! Doesn't she realize that her body is*

*a walking refrigerator? A fairy maid wouldn't dare touch me in such a fashion.*

"Hey, Flandre? Are you even listening to me? How did she beat you, anyway?"

Flandre narrowed her crimson eyes. It sounded like an excuse even to herself but truthfully, she just couldn't remember.

"She didn't really beat me," Flandre mumbled defensively. "Don't forget that I beat her once before at the shop, and that was without any of those underhanded tricks that she likes to employ."

Cirno pointed an accusing finger straight at her companion's face close enough for her wintry breeze to wrinkle Flandre's nose.

"I don't remember ever seeing that! I'm not going to let you trick me. As my rival, you're not allowed to lie or lose to anyone else!"

"Well it did happen, and since when was I your rival?" Flandre shrugged and shook her head.

*I'll teach you some manners...*

Cirno was only slightly shorter than Flandre, but that didn't stop the vampire from rubbing her blue hair like a domineering older classmate. "How could a mere fairy be my rival? Fairies are always sidekicks in novels, never the heroes."

Flandre knew that she was lighting the powderkeg however the temptation was simply too much to resist. Tormenting fairies was a hard habit to kick, one that she had developed from her long years lurking the mansion's depths.

Her quip had the desired effect, as she knew it would. The happy icicles that had previously surrounded Cirno shattered into shimmering pieces along with her good mood. Her eyes watered, the delicate surface reflective like an ice covered lake.

"I'm the hero of my own story," Cirno shot back. She pushed herself up as far as her feet could manage. "They don't call them fairytales for nothing. Besides, I'd much rather be a sidekick than a villain." Cirno folded her arms smugly and closed her eyes as if that was the end of the matter. "Vampires only show up to be staked by the hero."

A freezing shard of ice crystallized in Cirno's clenched palm. Flandre's mouth twitched as an irrational, almost primal fear took root. The younger Scarlet greatly enjoyed reading fantasy novels. They transported her outside the confining walls of the Scarlet devil mansion which pleased her immensely.

Flandre often dreamed of dashing knights and kidnapped maidens and knew most of the old legends and fables. As such, a stake, even if held by a sponge brain like Cirno gave her some pause.

"Don't wave that thing around," Flandre warned. "You're more likely to impale that hollow head of yours. Just wait for Mokou and try not to do anything stupid."

"Don't pretend that you're not scared," Cirno taunted as she stabbed the empty air like an amateur fencer. "Hand over your crystals fiend or I'll banish you to the netherworld!"

Flandre felt like knocking the stupid out of her but feared that it would do more harm than good.

The ground shook with a muffled explosion from somewhere deep underground. Piles of earth were kicked up like rumbling geysers with every successive impact. The bamboo stalks shook hard enough to produce a green rain of fluttering leaves. It might have appeared beautiful if not for the constant thumping.

Cirno stumbled forwards, the icy stake plunging downwards like a deadly pendulum. Flandre gasped and reflexively shattered the stake like glass. The ferocious energy transformed the ice into hot, boiling water which splashed against Cirno.

Her pitiful shrieks hurt Flandre deeply for she was no stranger to unintentionally harming those around her. She began to babble incoherently, a string of apologies that made absolutely no sense. She started to wonder whether she was the cause of this catastrophe without even realizing it.

Several tall bamboo stalks were uprooted and crashed to the forest floor. Birds flapped to safety as their makeshift nests were overturned. A patch of earth was obliterated as a blinding coil of purple light churned up the ground as explosively as a landmine. Flandre looked down at her shuddering hand. She couldn't tell if it was caused by the unexplained earthquake or her own internal turmoil.

"What are you doing?" Cirno shouted loud enough to be heard. The fairy struggled to keep her footing as the bamboo forest thumped irregularly like an off tune drummer.

"Get out of here," yelled Mokou moments before she erupted from the tunnel on trails of flame. Her dramatic entrance resembled a giant cannon blasting its hefty shell into the history books. Several shining arrows followed her, much larger than the one that had poisoned Flandre. They screamed maddeningly, filled as they were with Eirin's murderous fury at the fate that had befallen her princess.

Kaguya's home began to glow, the moonlight blazing away the night's blackness like a lighthouse. Cirno shook Flandre out of her daze and pulled her up into the sky. Off the ground at last, they found nothing hindering them. Mokou spun around and matched each of the furious arrows with her own cleansing fireballs. Each marriage of fire and energy exploded in a flashy universe of starry creation.

Eirin Yagokoro flew out of the residence and joined the three intruders as they floated high above. The moonlight was so intensely blinding that the silver haired woman appeared like an angel, bathed as she was by the powerful glow.

None could lay an eye upon her silhouetted figure. Flandre shielded her vision before she lost it completely. The moonlight swallowed up the surrounding landscape until the world was consumed in a blanket of pale whiteness.

Flandre suddenly doubled over in mid-air, her sense of balance inexplicably failing her. It became much harder to breathe and her lungs worked themselves harder to absorb every molecule of oxygen possible. A sense of weightlessness made her feel like a floating leaf caught in the wind.

Alarmed, Flandre opened her eyes and realized that she had been transported to an utterly alien world. The scenery was barren and desolate with deep craters in the places of trees. The black sky was a tapestry of stars but none that Flandre recognized and she spent many a night staring up at the heavens and dreaming of distant lands.

"How do you like the moon?" Eirin asked as another arrow materialized inside her gleaming bow. "It is but a pale imitation; an expertly recreated illusion that occasionally helps the Princess reminisce. You're all unworthy to witness it but I think that it'll make a fitting battlefield for the Princess' revenge at my hands."

Mokou floundered in the low gravity, her long strands of hair flowing around her like she was floating in the deep sea. Her flaming aura dissipated as the burning fire suffocated and died. The red charms affixed to her silver hair glowed brightly as they attempted to reject the foreign magic surrounding their master. Even illusions could be real enough to be almost indistinguishable from the real thing.

Clutching at her throat, Mokou snarled at the tricky Lunarian.

"An ugly, empty place for an equally ugly race. Just what I'd expect from the twisted mind of a Lunarian," she spat. Flandre strained to hear her words in the low atmosphere.

Eirin sneered, her hands moving seamlessly to loose off arrow after deadly arrow at her hated adversary. The projectiles broke away and trailed in at Mokou from several different directions.

They moved impossibly fast considering the constraints of this new realm but Eirin was playing with a home field advantage. In contrast, Mokou's flight was slow and sluggish while her magic was unable to draw on the rich, enchanting power of Gensokyo.

Mokou swore profusely. With no collateral damage to concern herself with, Mokou unshackled the self imposed limits on her constantly blazing soul and ignited the space around her into an inhospitable, everlasting fire.

It roared more fiercely than an entire pride of lions and flowed threateningly in the low gravity like oil and water. Mokou blazed at the centre of it where anything else would have been reduced to nothingness.

The luminous arrows splashed into the ocean of flame which caused the colour to change into an unstable, vicious looking mixture of furious reds and oranges and innocent whites. Mokou could see nothing but a constantly shifting tempest of shades like she was surfing along the wave of a giant rainbow.

Eirin's face was bathed in the memorizing glow. While her opponent was totally blinded, she appeared above Mokou and stuck the whole firestorm down with a colossal pillar of silvery liquid. The mercury flooded the fiery sphere and heated it up into a bubbling mass. Mokou screamed in agony as the blistering substance passed through her skin.

It took much to make Mokou scream who had been killed countless times in her eternal feud with Kaguya but the indescribable feelings of having her insides roasted almost made her black out from the pain.

She hit the lunar surface, several chalk coloured rocks splintering under the impact. The blazing flame disappeared and Mokou drifted slowly in the empty space. Silvery liquid the same colour as her flowing hair surrounded her like a halo.

Eirin watched Mokou's pained expression coldly with not even the briefest hint of emotion. Her vengeance was cool and restrained just like her professional doctoring. She prided herself on delivering the utmost level of brilliance in whatever task she undertook and restoring the princess' honour was no exception.

"Foolish Mokou," she said . "How dare you continue to exist. Your eternal flame is a constant reminder that you stole the gift of immortality, a gift that was only meant for the princess' lips. You, a low born human enjoying the benefits of my magnificent Hourai elixir? The very idea is an insult!"

"And that wasn't enough for you, oh no, you had to rub my face in it by coming to Gensokyo and constantly harassing the princess with your petty squabbles. I only tolerate you because the princess finds your obsession with her so comical. To think that an unruly, jealous little silver haired girl from some unremarkable human settlement would hold such hatred for such a length of time. And to think, the princess didn't even remember you until you showed up one day proclaiming your long-standing quest for revenge. What a pointless existence."

"Shut up," spat Mokou as she clutched her chest tightly.

Eirin looked down at Mokou thoughtfully. "The Hourai elixir was my masterpiece and cost me so very much. My high standing, my friends and colleagues and the wonderful, serene moon itself but I'd sacrifice it all over again in an instant if it meant pleasing my princess. Ever time I see you, I often wonder if I could undo the effects of the Hourai elixir and surpass my former self. It would make quite an interesting challenge though not a very pleasant one for you."



"Talk, talk, talk," Mokou said while fighting to keep the agony out of her voice. "Why don't you just shut up that self-absorbed trap of yours."

Eirin tutted and glanced around at the flailing forms of Flandre and Cirno. "Just stay there, Mokou. I'll be with you shortly."

Flandre snarled as Eirin gloated over the fiery woman's drifting body. An overwhelming sense of injustice thundered up inside her and she used that strong determination to help steady herself. Anger always did help to reduce the number of distractions until Flandre was able to focus her curious eyes on one single point. That would be the only thing residing in her mind until it either wisely disappeared or snapped like a twig.

"It's so hard to breath here," moaned Cirno as she spun around in circles like a blazing catherine wheel only with scintillating ice instead of flame. She looked at Flandre and a flash of inspiration ignited a recent memory. She remembered Letty telling her that mermaids had been known to occasionally save drowning sailors by bestowing the gift of lifesaving air from their own lungs. Well, Flandre shouldn't mind. This was an emergency!

Cirno floated over and tried to press her mouth against Flandre's own. All the vampire saw was a descending pair of cold, puckering lips trying to steal away her precious first kiss while she was distracted. Reflectively, she forcefully shoved the ice fairy down into a tailspin. Cirno wailed as her whole world suddenly starting spinning into a series of blinking snapshots.

"W-what are you doing?" Flandre exclaimed.

"Oh, don't be such a prude, little Flandre," remarked Yukari Yakumo who was watching the proceedings from a practically unnoticeable gap high in the dark sky. Her all seeing purple eyes gazed out of the peeping hole with no small amount of amusement as Flandre spun around like someone had slipped a wet blanket down the back of her dress. Did she imagine that voice?

*Ah, such youthful spirit*, Yukari thought. Fooling around in the face of certain danger was so typical of younger beings.

Yuyuko had been most distraught about the loss of her beautiful, wavy hair. Yukari had told her soothing words while softly combing her remaining pink strands. Truthfully, it didn't look that bad but she didn't dare mention that to Yuyuko who was far too busy crying her heart out while insisting that Yukari herself punish those horrible moon bitches responsible for this travesty.

How utterly bothersome. Yukari knew that her long-standing friend would never show this side of her to even her trusted gardener Youmu. How could she possibly refuse? And so here she was, embroiled in this distraction instead of overseeing Reimu and making sure that everything played out as it should.

Still, perhaps this would be more interesting than she had originally thought. Having that girl Flandre do the deed would work out nicely since Yukari disliked flaunting her powers. It was much more stimulating to wrap people around her fingers while finding the gaps in their resolve.

"Do you need any help?" she whispered, projecting her voice through a miniscule gap so that it brushed right inside Flandre's ear. Yukari knew that this fake moonscape would provide more than enough magical interference for her abilities and presence to go unnoticed.

The hairs on the back of Flandre's neck bristled like a ghost had tickled her skin. "Who is this? Don't interfere with me!"

"Oh, have you forgotten me already? You should accept my help, little Flandre. Eirin can be quite imaginative when it comes to inflicting injuries."

Flandre recognized her now. That deceptive, blackmailing gap demon was trying to make a fool of her again.

"Buzz off," she snapped. "I can handle this by myself."

Yukari shook her head. What a rude little girl.

Flandre sucked in as much oxygen as she could managed from the thin air and drifted down to where Cirno was still chaotically trying to master the art of flying on the moon.

"Hey, Cirno; listen to me. We need to work together."

"But you pushed me! And the air is so stale!"

"We don't have the time for moaning!" Flandre said. "Just grab my arms and follow my lead."

Flandre felt a little silly locking arms with Cirno but necessity demanded it. Their shining trails joined together as they flew like twin shooting stars. With double the power came half the control and the abnormal conditions didn't help one bit.

Flandre found manoeuvring frustratingly difficult as they rocketed haphazardly towards the imposing form of Eirin who wasted no time in firing off a screaming arrow. It rippled like a chameleon as it closed the distance impossibly fast.

"Just follow my lead!" demanded Flandre as she struggled to keep herself on course but the fairy had other ideas. With boundless conviction, Cirno pursued her own recklessly dangerous strategy while assuring Flandre of her own genius. Cirno's spare hand spat out blue ice that froze the air molecules solid in front of the missile producing a cold mist that would in theory interfere with the arrow's trajectory.

Unfortunately, the sometimes erratic rules of Gensokyo didn't really apply to the concrete laws of the lunar surface. The humming arrowhead only wavered slightly as it pieced through the glittering mistcloud. Flandre strained as she wrestled control and pulled them away from certain disaster.

Yukari just floated there, an avid spectator in Flandre's troubles as she casually peeked outside her dark, ribbon-clad portal. Tucked safely inside her own dimension, Yukari smiled at this free source of entertainment, content that she was above such petty concerns. She felt like clapping at the performance as the hapless duo evaded the vengeful Eirin's attacks by the skin of their teeth.

She especially liked the way that Flandre seemed to be quickly adapting to the alien environment. Clearly this vampire girl had much talent in the art of danmaku. The shining arrows with their twisting, confusing movements were now missing their mark by a much wider margin. Yukari enjoyed the growing look of frustration on Eirin's face as her arrows were either frozen solid or blasted into oblivion by destructive energies.

"Better reach inside your box of tricks," her red lips whispered.

The lunar surface flickered and distorted in places as the magic holding it together was shattered by the repeated, violent clashes. Hunks of crumbling dirt and fragments of bamboo drifted into the constructed void as a reminder that this place wasn't entirely real.

The cloud of frosty vapour emitted from Cirno's wings evaporated as Flandre's power radiated. A glowing aura surrounded her body while also enveloping the ice fairy. Cirno gritted her teeth as the static sensation passed throughout her body like an electrical shock but the self proclaimed strongest fairy wouldn't bow to such pressures.

Flandre finally felt confident enough to attack. The built up power her fervent spirit had accumulated took the form of a bright circle with whirling, incandescent blades the colour of water. It spun dangerously close to Cirno's rather worried looking face and the loud beating sound thumped inside her head. Her cheeks flapped more vigorously than clothing trapped on a washing line as Flandre launched the shuriken with a whoosh of magical potential.

It shredded multiple arrows before Eirin decided to take matters a little more seriously. She stopped her endless barrage and

concentrated, her bow steaming hot from constant use. Her long silver ponytail flapped behind her as her milky eyes lit up with what looked like detailed star charts. She altered the characteristics of the moon so that the gravity peeked around the threatening object before crushing it into a rapidly shrinking orb.

With nowhere to escape, all that incalculable energy collapsed into a miniature black hole before exploding into harmless rays of weak light. Eirin grinned, her glittering eyes turning their attentions to the onrushing vampire and fairy. Flandre grimaced as she strained against the pressing weight with her own strength. Her crystal wings became pinned against her back. The pain increased as her bones protested against this invisible vice.

Cirno whimpered as her icy wings splintered and cracked but she didn't cry out. She knew that Flandre was enduring the same hardships and was determined not to be the first one to give up. The sensation of being slowly crushed alive made it even more difficult to breathe as their lungs constricted under the building pressure. Both girls tried to push the unseen walls back as the space became smaller and smaller but there was no fighting such an irresistible force of nature.

Yukari could see the fear and desperation in their eyes like deer caught in a bear trap. She didn't approve of outright killing and wondered if she should step in before matters came to a bloody conclusion.

Flandre howled as she swiped her claws in deadly arcs and discharged some of her most damaging magic in her attempts to break free but nothing seemed to work. Flandre had always been able to destroy anything effortlessly but this wasn't something tangible that could be snapped; this was far more sinister than that.

Cirno hammered her fists, her fear growing with every passing moment. The knowledge that she would be reborn was cold comfort indeed when it didn't prevent you from being pressed into a fairy sandwich.

Eirin watched them dispassionately and counted down the seconds until their demise. She felt no pity for those that dishonoured her esteemed princess. She only regretted that Kaguya herself could not witness her moment of vindication but at least Mokou would still be alive in some fashion or other to satisfy matters.

Eirin's skin tingled as the temperature dropped several degrees. An intense, bedazzling blue light washed over the moonscape like the unsettling creeping of a solar eclipse across the ground. She could see that the fairy had filled her remaining space with a great gleaming sapphire of ice. The smooth, reflective surface flashed as it caught what little natural light resided inside this imitation.

The vampire pressed her shoes against the ice and braced herself against the great compressing weight of gravity. Cirno continued to flood the rapidly shrinking space with ice but paused when she noticed that her friend's legs were shaking unsteadily.

"Flandre, are you-"

"Just keep going," Flandre yelled as she strained to remain standing.

Yukari wondered just what exactly the vampire was planning by squandering what little space remained to her but she was eager to find out; to witness the power that defeated Yuyuko. She chuckled as she wondered if she would get the opportunity to judge the gladiatorial proceedings like a Roman emperor.

"Now!" Flandre ordered. Cirno couldn't bear to look as she focused all her power behind Flandre and pushed with everything she had. The ice rumbled and snapped like shattering glass as it formed itself behind the vampire. Either Flandre would break through or Cirno would mangle her into a pulpy mess.

Flandre's arms wobbled as she pushed against the suffocating cage. At first it looked like she was battling against nothing until her talons slashed ferocious red lines in the Luna illusion. The magic struggled to contain this irregularity as Flandre dug deep rents in it's delicately

crafted design. Then it snapped, the sound popping ears as Flandre was propelled outwards by the sparkling spiral of ice.

Eirin frantically tried to cut her link with the tortured realm but wasn't fast quite fast enough. She shrieked as the feedback practically blinded her, the glowing connections fizzling out across her delicate eyes. Twisted versions of the moon flickered across her vision, torturing her with nightmarish, apocalyptic pictures of her long lost home. How could someone destroy such a thing of beauty?

"No, no," she wailed. "How cruel!" She desperately wanted to banish away these horrible premonitions.

Yukari watched as Flandre slammed against Eirin's many layers of interwoven fields like a battering ram. They were clearly no match for the vampire's ruinous talents, her very touch almost an anathema to existence.

Intrigued, Yukari reached out and instantly regretted doing so as she experienced the squealing breakdown of magical energy first hand. Blood dribbled from her nose as something very convincing suggested that she should die. Yukari shuddered and wrenched herself free from this horrifying feeling.

For a spiritual being such as a Youkai, there were fewer things more dangerous than something denying your continued right to endure.

## Personality Clash

Mokou groaned, her fingers digging into the earth. The red and white oriental charms tied among her silvery hair looked dull and lifeless as they worked tirelessly to remove the last vestiges of whatever harmful substance still remained inside her body.

It had been as hot as fire but formless like liquid and had seeped through her skin like she was an oversized sponge while scorching her insides along the way. The pain still lingered and her forehead throbbed harder than a night out drinking with Keine. Still, she was well used to pain in it's many forms and pushed herself up into an awkward crouch. She would recover; she always did.

"Damn it all," she spat, disappointed in herself. She should have known that charging headlong against the genius mind that created the Hourai Elixir was a very bad idea. If anyone could overcome an immortal, the sadistic Eirin Yagokoro would probably top the list.

She sighed and looked around, noting with relief that she was back in the healthy green of the bamboo forest and not the freezing, barren moonscape. Mokou hated the moon with a fiery passion.

"Stay back!"

Mokou watched as Eirin crawled backwards from a very angry vampire. Ripples of unstable energy surrounded Flandre; the rich, vibrant colours flickering the nearby plant-life like wind. Upon contact, the plants either withered into blackened dust or warped into chaotic, flamboyant designs more striking than a peacock's shimmering feathers.

Eirin's well manicured nails chipped as she dragged herself back through the dirty forest floor. Eirin was panting heavily with sweat beading down her pale face. It amused Mokou to see the famous doctor dragging herself across the ground considering that she



probably hadn't done a single day's worth of hard labour in her very privileged life.

Perhaps that would humble Eirin a little bit but somehow Mokou doubted it. Arrogance seemed to be a requirement of simply wearing the Lunarian name.

Mokou blinked as another one of Eirin's shining blue barriers shattered in her attempts to protect herself from this vengeful little girl. It crackled loudly as it blinked out of existence and left behind a scent of burning ozone. Eirin's hands were thrown back by the recoil, her fingers twitching like she had just jammed her hand into an electrical socket.

"What's the matter?" asked Flandre, her every step slow and deliberate. "You seemed so confident? Don't you want to play anymore?"

Eirin frowned, her mind racing through countless possibilities with every passing second. She discarded complex strategies and schemes faster than most people squeeze out a single thought. Eirin was the famed genius that had created many wonders and marvellous creations; even when compared against the other fabled minds of the moon, she was the best.

Someone such as her should be able to overcome an immature, bloodsucking vampire without breaking a sweat. Her back hit a bamboo stalk and Eirin knew that her time had run out.

"Well done, vampire," she said, her voice confident despite the circumstances. "Tell me, because I'm genuinely curious. Why would you sell your soul working for Yukari? Whatever she has promised you, I can assure you that it isn't worth it."

Flandre couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Didn't you listen to me before? Get it through your thick head! The reason you're currently cowering on the floor isn't because I'm working for that old gap demon!"

Up above, Yukari scowled as she wiped the blood away from her nose with an elaborately frilly handkerchief.

"It's because you and your princess are arrogant fools for poisoning and imprisoning me. Well, now it's time to pay up."

Standing safely behind her friend, Cirno felt sufficiently confident enough to merrily jeer at the fallen doctor. Cirno couldn't wait to tell everyone else back at the fairy forest about all her fantastic exploits. Cirno giggled as she imagined the astonished looks on their faces as they hung on her every word.

*"Cirno, with a little help from her vampire friend vanquishes the evil Lunarian princess and her lackeys!"* or something like that.

"Oh, is that all you seek?" said Eirin who looked up at Flandre without a hint of remorsefulness. "Compensation? Well, I will gladly provide you with a suitable reward, one most fitting for someone such as you."

Eirin pulled out a simple, unremarkable mirror that she used to apply makeup and held it up for Flandre to see. The reflection that so many women relied upon to provide them beauty once again denied Flandre like she was somehow beneath it's notice.

She had always hated mirrors and the empty, smooth surface that refused to even acknowledge that she even existed while all the other normal girls chatted happily together while playing with lipstick and other products. Eirin hadn't intended so deep a reaction but was happy to take advantage all the same.

While Flandre's hateful intentions were focused on that reflective surface, Eirin produced a syringe from inside her blue and red dress. The neon mixture inside seemed to be almost excited as it bumped against the glass, the cool forest air changing it's structure on the molecular level. Instead of lunging forwards and delivering her tender loving care, someone strong grabbed her wrist and squeezed down hard.

"Not so fast," said Mokou who allowed a little flame to leap out between her fingers. Eirin winced and immediately dropped the syringe as she frantically tried to pull herself away from the scorching pain.

All Eirin's other thoughts abandoned her mind, only the fiery inferno of agony remaining like that one memory that refused to be forgotten. Eventually, Mokou released her and Eirin snatched her arm away from the dragon's mouth.

The smell of burning fabric and blood permeated the air like the sickening warning signs of a plague. Eirin desperately wanted to rub some soothing ointment on the hot, itchy wound but that would have to wait. Still, while unwelcome, Eirin supposed that the wound would serve a purpose.

"What do you think you're doing?" Flandre exclaimed who had already been in a bad mood even before the scent of blood affected her. "She's my prey, not yours!"

Mokou looked at Flandre hard. "You're not seriously trying to quibble with me, are you? You can have your fun when I'm good and finished."

"I don't care!" Flandre said and crushed a nearby flower underfoot. The petals burst into indigo flame, the fragments disintegrating into vivid dust. It was clear that Flandre had no intentions of backing down.

"I have a history with this one," Mokou stated, as if voicing the words themselves would be enough to make Flandre back down but it soon became clear that her anger wouldn't be sated so easily.

"I don't care!" Flandre repeated. "Stand aside! I'm the one who defeated her! I deserve this! Look at her, taunting me the way she licks longingly at her wound, the blood dripping down her arm!"

"Hey," said Cirno. "Don't you forget me! I defeated her too!"

"Yes, yes," Flandre said, the words, innocent as they may be only served to reinforce her sense of injustice. "We worked together for this, so why are you trying to claim it for yourself?"

The grass around her feet stirred uneasily. Cirno was sure that if they could have uprooted themselves and scampered away, they would have gladly done so.

Eirin looked up at Mokou knowingly. "My, my, I seem to be so popular all of a sudden. Well, Mokou? You're not going to let that murderous little girl have her way with me, are you?"

Mokou twitched with annoyance. She knew very well that she couldn't kill Eirin or stand by while someone else did the bloody deed. Not that she particularly wanted to, but that wasn't the point.

Long ago, the mutual killing game between Mokou and Kaguya started to effect those around them. Of course, it always had only Mokou had been too angry to notice it at the time. Nothing else mattered but revenge and god help anyone that got between her and Kaguya.

It wasn't surprising really when you consider in those early days, the hatred was raw and unrestrained. The savage glee Kaguya and Mokou took at tearing each other apart would reduce the local area and anything within it to smouldering ruins.

Venturing inside the bamboo forest became tantamount to having a death wish. The silver haired, fiery demon and the otherworldly, callous princess. Indeed, it became a popular suicide destination for a while, but of course, nothing lasts forever.

Even an intense, deep rooted hatred lessens over time when you're able to kill your enemy repeatedly and in many vicious and satisfying ways. Mokou had also developed attachments to this strange land of Gensokyo, though she had tried her very best not to.

The schoolteacher Keine had tempered Mokou's passionate hostility. On the other side, Kaguya cared deeply for her few loyal attendants who had abandoned everything to accompany their beloved princess to Gensokyo though she was much too proud to admit such an embarrassing sentiment.

And thus an agreement had been made not to involve anyone else in their timeless vendetta. At least anyone who mattered, which unfortunately included Eirin.

"I'll show you just how murderous I can be!" snapped Flandre, a hateful glint flashing across her bright red eyes.

Eirin allowed herself a spiteful, humourless smile just to infuriate Flandre even further. Petty perhaps, but a small victory nonetheless. She had failed to avenge the great princess Kaguya's honour, a fact that saddened her more than anything else.

Eirin never felt much emotion but her strong sense of duty was central to her identity. Failure was almost a foreign word in her vocabulary.

"What's the matter, vampire?" she asked. "Do you need to ask permission for everything you do? How pathetic!"

Eirin laughed at Flandre awkwardly, not used to the gesture. She tried to imitate Kaguya's haughty chuckle but didn't quite pull it off. Still, it was enough to push Flandre over the edge. She surged forwards, her sharp claws only moments away from plunging into Lunarian flesh.

A bright plume of flame whirled up around Mokou and surrounded her like a flickering red dress. Flandre crashed against it, her talons denying Mokou's fire and banishing it away with a mixture of fury and power.

Flandre's face glowed brightly as she pushed against the wall of flame. All around her, grass and bamboo was vaporized into

blackened dust but still she persisted. Her eyes could see nothing but a hot, stifling curtain of leaping fire.

The heat was unreal; much hotter than the stone cookers back at the mansion. Anyone else might have been scared, but Flandre just treated it as another obstruction to overcome. Another test of her strength.

Mokou would have shouted a warning but she knew that nothing could be heard over the intense, crackling inferno.

Cirno likewise couldn't get through to the hotheaded vampire. Moisture dripped freely from her frozen wings and down her cold, pale skin. Her soft blue hair was slick and stuck unpleasantly to her scalp.

"Stupid Flandre!" Cirno bawled as she took shelter behind one of the stone marble guard dogs that stood outside Eientei before she melted like ice cream on a hot summers day.

Mokou didn't really want to hurt the girl, nor protect that insufferable crackpot Eirin and so only half-heartedly maintained her blazing shield wall but when Flandre came strolling through the roasting cavern like some demon awakened from hell, Mokou knew that she had to put in a little more effort.

"Damn brat," Mokou muttered, her silver hair fluttering wildly. Lets see how you handle a little spice, thought the pyromaniac.

Mokou breathed into the flame, her own magically charged oxygen sparking life. Flandre stumbled as a dragons head, monstrous in appearance appeared among the wildfire. It was pure fire, it's eye sockets empty pits of hell. It bellowed right in her face, as if it was enraged that someone had intruded into it's lair. The force of the beast's scream drove Flandre to her knees, it's fiery howl rattling her skull.

Up above, Yukari Yakumo, that enigmatic observer and occasional mischief maker sighed disappointedly. While the spectacular wildfire was beautiful to behold, like a torch in the darkness, all Yukari could see was a giant, vivid fireball and not the actors struggling within. Peering out from her ribbon tied portal, her legs kicked out impatiently in empty space; the soup of dimensional unreality.

While tempting, she wouldn't use her many gifts to snoop in on whatever climatic struggle was currently under way. At least not until she'd safely determined the source of that horrible feeling. Was the vampire girl possessed by an evil spirit or simply protected by some extremely well hidden and unpleasant magical wards?

Unlikely, but who really knows in Gensokyo? Information is power, especially in a land filled with so many uniquely dangerous talents and that girl, Flandre, had certainly pinged her interest.

Yukari watched as Eirin flicked her wrist, flecks of her fresh blood hitting the roaring firestorm. Immediately, the pure fire became discoloured as a sickness overtook it, polluting it like black oil.

Eirin's bloodstream was home to many intoxicating and frankly illegal substances, many of them her own creations. In fact, some drugs were simply meant to keep the other more harmful mixtures from overloading her system completely. A few drops would be potent enough to poison a fresh water well but such danger never bothered Eirin. It bothered her test subject Reisen, but nothing a little friendly punishment wouldn't fix.

Where there had once been bright red flame, now only a putrid blackness remained. The roasting currents now cooked a truly terrible concoction, trapping it inside. Mokou suffered a coughing fit as her beautiful cleansing flame was tainted and twisted into a dark, smoking fire of sickening pollution.

The powerful fumes turned Flandre's stomach upside down. The smell was atrocious and seeped into everything. It felt like a

thousand mouthfuls of the purest spring water wouldn't be enough to wash the horrible taste out of her mouth.

The slight tinge of insanity and excitement that Flandre felt was instead replaced with utter revulsion. Where once before this heated wall had been a challenge, now it only represented a prison. She desperately wanted out and wasn't particular about how she went about it.

The ground rumbled as Flandre unconsciously reached inside herself to that dark, secret place that constantly strained to break free. The place her mind turned to whenever she felt stressed or in life threatening danger.

It wasn't a happy, nor a welcoming place. It was fearsome and destructive but despite this, the devilish power proved seductive like a warm blanket that protected her from unnecessary thoughts and pains. It was all too easy to simply cut loose and erase simple hardships rather than having to face the consequences.

The imperfections corrupting the flame nearest to her were instantly expunged, the fierce oranges and yellows returning in full, brilliant force. But Flandre didn't stop there, couldn't stop there. The magical fire withered and dulled like something was sucking the life from it.

The dragon heads whimpered uncertainly and one by one, they faded away like the grand old beasts of legend that they represented. Before things could get out of hand however, Mokou banished the raging fire away so that she could escape this noxious torment.

Meanwhile, Eirin retreated towards the house of eternity in order to prepare for Kaguya's resurrection. The pale imitation moonlight flashed across her face as she approached the front door, promising that familiar sense of safety.

Her head still ached fiercely from the residual effects of the feedback, a pounding against her temple that wouldn't let up. Well,



nothing that a little medication wouldn't fix but the indignity of failure would be a harder matter to heal.

The princess had surely resurrected by now and Eirin intended to be there with fresh change of clothing befitting someone of Kaguya's station. She wouldn't have Kakuya rampaging across the bamboo forest completely naked again in her vengeful search for Mokou.

Bribing and downright threatening that annoying Tengu to keep the pictures out of the paper had been a truly nerve-wracking experience and not one that she wished to repeat. The interlopers had proven more resourceful than she had anticipated but with Kaguya and Reisen by her side, they would surely answer for their crimes.

Eirin reached the immense door and noticed that the sentient handle had been crudely melted away. Silver dribbles of liquid metal had hardened down the wooden surface. She cursed Mokou silently under her breath. That girl had always been intensely jealous of the splendour and history of anything Lunarian.

As a low born cur, Mokou couldn't help but destroy that which she could never attain herself. How pathetic Eirin thought as she began to push the doors open but before she could step inside, flashes of blue ice began to crystallize around her body.

"I saw what you did," accused Cirno who had been hiding behind the stone statue. "I won't let you get away with it!"

Eirin dropped to the ground, her limbs weighted down by gleaming ice. Even the exotic drugs coursing throughout her bloodstream couldn't counteract the freezing effect from gripping her body like the inevitability of an arctic night. She fell against the door, the hardened ice grafting her glinting uniform to the house.

"Damn it," Eirin said, her fingers stiffening as if caught in slow motion. Her lips turned a deep shade of blue while her skin looked deathly white as all warmth left her. Eirin's mouth quivered one last

time before she froze solidly in place and joined the two stone dogs in guarding the entrance to the house of eternity.

Not content with that, Cirno giggled as her tiny hands morphed and shaped the ice. The clear surface cracked as cat ears sprung up atop Eirin's head and a long, ramrod straight tail jutted out from her behind. Crudely drawn lettering appeared across its clear surface like misty messages on a steamed up window.

Phrases that only Cirno and her friends would find funny such as 'danmaku magnet' and 'please fireball me' appeared along with many others that made the ice fairy supremely satisfied with her hilarious wit.

While Cirno was having her fun, Flandre braced herself against a charred bamboo stalk. After roasting in Mokou's blazing inferno for so long, Flandre was hot, sweaty and extremely exhausted. The poison sickness had knocked the excitement out of her more effectively than one of Sakuya's long winded lectures.

As a result, all that overwhelmingly vigorous energy had been locked away. Flandre felt diminished, somehow smaller than usual now that her frantic nature had disappeared but she knew that it would be back. It always came back. Her memory was hazy, like the aftermath of a drunken rampage.

"Cirno," she whispered.

Suddenly worried that she had done some unspeakable deed she looked around fearfully but breathed a sigh of relief when Cirno's cheerful form came into focus.

The fairy seemed to be having the time of her life. She skipped around happily spraying ice everywhere like a celebration of winter and everything cold. Blue sparks glittered in the night as she sprawled things across Eientei that would easily earn Flandre a harsh scolding.

Flandre smiled, despite the sticky discomfort. While the aura outside Eientei resembled a burnt out, fire-bombed disaster zone at least Cirno had kept herself safe and sound.

Mokou glared at Flandre, her fists tightening. The forest floor had been thoroughly glassed and crunched underfoot as Mokou stalked towards the vampire. Ash floated to the ground, the remains of burnt vegetation. It resembled scraps of burnt paper rather than snow.

Keine often berated her for being such a recluse but if the alternative was running into self-styled gods, vengeful ghosts or beings with more power than sense which was all too common in Gensokyo, then you'd forgive Mokou if she often preferred her own company.

"Stupid kid," Mokou muttered darkly. "Getting your panties in a twist over something so stupid."

While tired, Flandre was still acutely aware that she was being insulted.

*Stupid, am I?*

She leaned against the charred bamboo stalk and pushed herself up to better glare at her accuser. Her claws scrapped black strips of charcoal as she did so which mixed with the falling ash to create a black and white rain. Mokou stood tall above her like the embodiment of an ancient volcano ready to burst. She looked absolutely furious.

Flandre could actually feel her unbridled, impassioned aura brush against her soul. Too late she realized that Mokou wouldn't be intimidated by her thinly veiled threats, that she wasn't even the slightest bit impressed with her power.

Mokou grabbed Flandre by the collar and hauled her up so that they were staring face to face. They gazed into each other's eyes, neither one flinching.

"Unhand me!" demanded Flandre, her legs dangling beneath her.

"Listen here, girl," Mokou spat, her voice booming. "Get this through your thick skull! You're not special, at least not to me! I'm not going to kiss everything better! If you're an adult, than accept responsibility for your actions!"

Mokou pulled back her arm and drove her fist right into the vampire's face. There was no time to feel pain, only the total oblivion of unconsciousness.

Flandre hit the carbonized forest floor and didn't move.

Mokou winced and shook her hand. That vampire certainly had some strong cheek bones. Well, stubborn people did tend to be hard headed.

Cirno quickly shifted gears from cheerful anarchist to doleful sister.

"What did you do?" she asked loudly as she rushed over to Flandre's side. Concerned, she grabbed her shoulders and shook.

Mokou shrugged and shook her head. "The girl needed to cool off."

"Her name's Flandre, not girl! You didn't have to hit her like that!"

"No, I didn't but that girl, Flandre really pissed me off. I'm not a babysitter and won't put up with any rubbish."

The way Cirno frantically tried to wake her companion couldn't help but pull on Mokou's heartstrings. It was tragically rare to find someone as innocently devoted as a fairy. Those cheerful creatures needed to be handled with kid gloves.

"Listen, fairy. Flandre's tough. She'll be fine. Take your friend and leave this place before Kaguya shows up again. By my reckoning, that rotten wrench will be slivering up from her perverted bondage dungeon any moment now and unless you want to bask in her unpleasant company, you'd better be long gone."

"But you knocked her out! She won't even move!"

Mokou groaned. She couldn't believe that she was falling victim to emotional blackmail but Cirno's watery eyes were simply irresistible, like an orphaned child begging for help. Kaguya always taunted her for growing too soft as of late.

Perhaps she was right but Mokou didn't particularly care. She would always take solace in the fact that she was nothing like the haughty, stuck up princess who acted like someone had shoved a pineapple up her royal posterior.

"Just levitate her," Mokou said while trying her utmost to be patient.

"I can't do that!" exclaimed Cirno. "They're gonna find us and it's all your fault!"

"All my fault?" Mokou ruffled the fairy's fluffy blue hair. Cirno flinched as a small amount of steam puffed up from her head as the forces of fire and ice collided.

"Don't annoy me, *little* fairy." Mokou put great emphasise on the word 'little' to further highlight the size difference between them.

"If your friend was more level headed then she and you wouldn't be in this sorry mess. I suggest you put the kid on ice when she wakes. Maybe'll it chill her out a little."

Back in the dimensional rift which was nether here nor there, Yakumo Yukari waited with great interest. It took a great deal of self control not to chuckle heartily at poor, unfortunate Eirin but she resisted. For you see, she was no longer alone.

Keeping up appearances was paramount in Gensokyo. A good or sufficiently bad reputation opened a lot of doors where power alone might not. Well, unless you had the kind of bad reputation that prompted those around you to hold onto their wallets tightly but Marisa had always been a special case.

Her loyal nine tailed shikigami and occasional fluffy pillow was floating a respectful distance behind her master. Her limited mastery of Yukari's reality warping powers allowed her to safely drift in place and not be swept away by the phantasmal currents.

Losing yourself in the endless boundary was not recommended as a mortal might be driven mad before rescue arrives, if it ever arrives. Yukari did so enjoy her legendary slumbers.

Yukari peered around expectantly to her guest. Jutting out from the ribboned portal alongside Yukari high above the bamboo forest, Keine Kamishirasawa had observed Flandre and Mokou's intense clash of powers while occasionally bumping into Yukari in her eagerness to leap out the portal to put a stop to her friend's violent tendencies.

Yukari had enlisted the history teacher's aid with promises of several modern computers for her tragically unpopular schoolhouse. Of course, those helpful machines required electricity but Yukari didn't mention that little fact.

A few solar panels would surely secure any future favours Yukari might need. Thankfully computers didn't exist in Gensokyo otherwise Keine might have been able to glean it's history and see through Yukari's gambit.

"Did you witness everything, Keine?"

Keine nodded sombrely. Her unique ability was eating history while digesting it's practically limitless routes and possibilities. Usually the quest for knowledge filled her with a burning passion, but she detected nothing pleasing about Flandre's power.

## The Nature of Things

Floating within the possibly infinite realm that existed just outside of reality, Ran Yakumo's brows furrowed in intense concentration. A mere lapse in judgement would send her floating through the dimensional currents into oblivion.

Of course her master would never let such a fate befall her but Ran really disliked asking for assistance, particularly when it made her look like a helpless fox cub.

Which was why she dearly awaited the opportunity to pay the little vampire girl back for her insolence. Not only had she struck her, the little runt had had the audacity along with her bone headed fairy to toy with her prized, velvety nine-tails.

Those golden treasures, in which Ran was very proud, were for the exclusive use of her master and beloved Chen, not the clumsy, common hands of outsiders. Only her years of professional servitude had restrained her bestial wrath from avenging the honour of her soft, fluffy tails.

Those ever present floating eyeballs which resided within Yukari's vast domain, some of which were as large as a small moon watched her intently. Ran's skin prickled as she made a conscious effort to look away from the nearest inquisitive eyeball. A comforting thought was that they were simply an extension of Yukari's nature and thus completely harmless, at least to her loyal servant.

Ran shielded herself in that thought like a comforting shield of light among the many cosmic horrors. Wrapped tightly in the blanket of dreams, the sheer scale of this unspeakable place never failed to impress the nine-tailed Youkai. Numerous orbs and countless shifting anomalies, it truly was an otherworldly universe within the universe.

Ran was so caught up in her own inner musings that she didn't immediately register that her master required assistance.

"Calm yourself," Yukari demanded as Keine the schoolteacher and occasional hakutaku struggled to leap out of the portal like a carp escaping a creeping fishing net. Whatever Keine had experienced had filled her with genuine concern for Mokou's wellbeing which was very strange considering that Mokou was immortal.

That teasing oddity made Yukari even more curious but first she needed to make sure that her potential source of information didn't jump ship.

"Let me go!" pleaded Keine as the boundaries closed around her like an amorphous, sentient mass. The red ribbons around the edges of the portal tightened, constricting it.

"Stop struggling!" ordered Yukari to no avail.

Keine's limbs were swallowed up by the blackness. She yelped and fell backwards into unreality as all the feeling left her arms and legs. It was as if they had simply ceased to exist, cut off without pain nor sensation.

Ran flew forwards, her tails swirling behind her like a shooting star of beautiful yellow fur. She was like a sparkling amber jewel in the vast expanse of space. The many eyeballs watched as Ran placed her strong, powerful hands upon Keine, restraining her.

Yukari floated for a moment while she caught her breath. Even this brief bout of physical excursion was enough to colour her cheeks a shade of rosy red. While Yukari's attention wavered, her long blonde hair drifted around her like a head of Medusa's snakes.

Ran often feared that her sleepy master would suffer from muscle entropy one of these decades. She often cheerfully referred to her as 'sleeping boundary'.



"Well?" Yukari asked as tactfully as she could manage. "What is the nature of Flandre's power?"

When it became clear that she couldn't break away, Keine calmed down enough to answer. Perhaps they would see sense when she had finished explaining.

"It's a sickening feeling, at least to any supernatural or spiritual entity. You have to let me go! I don't want Mokou hanging around that girl. She's dangerous, insidious even."

"Not until you explain why," said Yukari entirely without sympathy. Her over active imagination couldn't take any more delays, not when the answers were so invitingly close at hand.

Keine looked reluctant to speak for a moment but hard stares convinced her otherwise. It was silent in the vast, dimensional space for a few fleeting seconds. The rippling colours of black and purple provided an ominous backdrop, one that Keine was keen to break, if not only for her own sanity.

"Such a poisonous feeling," Keine began, almost shuddering.

"That girl conceals a shadow inside her that detests anything exceptional, especially her own nature. I only saw dislocated snippets, snapshots of fragmented memories and awareness. A vampire rarely chooses their own future. Coming into the world anew, she found her old world foreign and unwelcoming. She was a creature of the daylight no longer."

Yukari remembered helping Yuyuko fish herself out of the sea of souls after being sucked up by her own deathly vortex. The look of embarrassment on her delicate features had been simply priceless.

Yukari had been most interested in whoever had managed such an impressive feat and after much pressuring, Yuyuko had spilled the beans; about how her barriers and protective wards had been

shattered without any resistance whatsoever. Yukari hadn't believed her at first considering what a skilled practitioner she was.

"Her chaotic power reveals in the chance to destroy anything magical and urges her onwards with maddening voices and it won't stop until she kills herself, because that's what it secretly wants. It's a miracle that she survived. She must have had great emotional support to last this long."

"It cannot be simple destruction," Yukari said as she floated in contemplation. That was far too simplistic, too basic a concept. The briefest glance into it had howled a profound rejection of her existence.

If you could reduce your presence down to a coil of string, then tapping into Flandre's power felt like some terrible force painfully unravelling you at the seams. If she hadn't broken off when she did... still, Keine was different. History was not direct but a study of things from a comfortable distance. That was the theory anyway.

Keine nodded sadly. Conveying her findings was like reliving a traumatic memory and the mind-bending tapestry of Yukari's realm didn't help matters.

"The nature of her power is the complete destruction of magical entities. Negativity in it's purist form, only directed at the source of her innermost demons. When I look upon the girl, all I see is the hardship of carrying that sinister nature around with her. Her wings, so unlike a vampire's. Bright and beautiful to behold. Most likely that's the form she wished for herself but denying your true nature can often be dangerous for the supernatural."

"So basically," Yukari said. "Flandre's power is the denial of spiritual entities which came about because she hated herself; a problem in which she has since overcome. Not quite as interesting as I imagined but still, her power cannot be denied, so to speak."

Yukari paused for a moment but nobody even so much as chuckled. Ran resisted the urge to sigh and instead forced a look of cold difference with practiced ease. Disheartened somewhat, Yukari toyed with one of the many red ribbons tied to her long blonde hair as she silently blamed the audience for such a melancholy atmosphere.

"Well, as long as we don't awaken the little devil inside her then we shouldn't have any problems, isn't that right?"

Keine nodded.

Yukari consciously weakened her hold and let the dimensional current wash against her like she was a buttress against change. She slowly drifted sideways as the invisible forces took hold.

"Thank you for your help, Keine Kamishirasawa. You may leave now."

"But what about Mokou? Surely you've noticed the corrosive effect that girl has?"

"Trust me," Yukari said, a sly smile crossing her lips. "You do trust me to handle this, don't you? The worried schoolteacher didn't reply which was probably for the best.

"Good, I'm glad that you have such faith in me."

A tear opened up in the shifting blackness and Keine disappeared down it like the gullet of some mighty beast swallowing her whole. She protested but her concerns were politely ignored as Yukari reassured her with comforting words that were almost true. Certainty wasn't always a certainty in Gensokyo.

"Well, Ran?" Yukari asked. "What do you think about that girl and her destructive power?"

"She's nothing special," Ran replies with genuine disinterest. "Just another immature soul with more power than sense which is sadly all too common nowadays."

"Oh, really? So you think my concerns are without basis? That her power is nothing noteworthy?"

"Forgive me master but Flandre is nothing compared to Yuyuko's mastery of the dead nor your own boundless abilities. Yuuka's ultimate magic, the Yama of Xanadu. Even her sister Remilia can supposedly manipulate fate, whatever that entails. Why worry about an immature girl who only has the potential to destroy those around her? That's such an unremarkable talent. Lady Yuyuko always enjoys toying with her opponents; her defeat was nothing more than a fluke."

Yukari shrugged. "Really Ran, after all these years you really should know by now. All those names, while impressive enough in their own right are all known quantities. Yuuka keeps to herself for the most part, the Yama is hardly one to cause trouble, Remilia followed the rules during the red mist incident and me? Well, I'm certainly the most troublesome but somebody has to run the show. And my dear Yuyuko is hardly one to make mistakes, despite her whimsical nature. Can you recall the last time she was bested outside danmaku?"

With Ran's memory which was as infallible as a supercomputer, it only took her a millisecond to deduce the truth of her master's words.

Vindicated, Yukari continued her lecture. She wished that Ran was more intuitive in the many abstract and fantastical possibilities. Most matters in Gensokyo were in uncomfortable shades of grey, not black and white.

"Exactly, and that's not the only thing. Since the boundary between Gensokyo and the physical realm is magical, her power indirectly gnaws at the links. I can see invisible fault-lines tearing at the very fabric of the boarder whenever she unwillingly taps into that power.

We need to tactfully deal with the unknown before it becomes a potential problem; a gentle shove in the correct direction."

"So a subtle intervention?" Ran asked.

"As subtle as usual," Yukari replied while watching Flandre through the narrow opening that overlooked the vast bamboo forest.

Meanwhile Eientei's three intruders were busy making their escape through the green thicket. Mokou knew that the deceptively cute rabbit guards of Eientei would be swarming the area soon enough in search of Kaguya's executioner but she didn't particularly care.

With Kaguya's immortality, you'd think they'd be used to their beloved princess dying by now but they always seemed so damn outraged. Probably scared of displeasing the tyrannical Eirin and ending up 'volunteering' for some new and untested procedure.

Mokou weaved in between the bamboo shoots with ease despite the darkness, her own burning aura providing all the illumination she required. Cirno followed closely behind, a blue glowing spear chasing the radiant fire. They were going fast and Mokou reluctantly shielded Flandre from the biting winds created by her blistering speed.

In Mokou's sturdy arms was the unconscious Flandre who breathed steadily in a dreamy state. She looked so peaceful and sweet in her mature looking red dress like a child playing dress up with their mother's clothing and nothing like the angry, rage filled firecracker from moments earlier. Hopefully the little ticking time bomb wouldn't wake up while held so dangerously close to Mokou's chest.

"Hey, you'd better be careful with her you delinquent!" Cirno said as she flew up alongside Mokou and her precious, sleeping passenger. Mokou frowned and almost swatted the annoying icy fairy away like an buzzing insect before she remembered that her arms were presently occupied.

"Delinquent?" she snapped while not for the first time wondering what in gods name she was doing. Helping this hapless pair of youngsters was cramping her style but she couldn't just leave them to Kaguya and her cronies, could she? No, at the very least she would deny Kaguya the smug satisfaction of punishing the one that snapped her stupid glowing wand.

"Yeah," accused Cirno. "Only delinquents punch and swear while wearing boys clothing. I've never even seen another girl wearing trousers!"

"Hey, did you forget about me helping you or do fairies have even less memory than a goldfish?"

Cirno spun around angrily like a frosty whirlwind while babbling nonsense. Speckles of hard ice ricocheted off Mokou's increasingly displeased face and once again she considered just abandoning these clowns.

"Stop that you moronic pixie!" she spat. "Or I'll drop your friend so the moon bitches can use the both of you for firewood!"

Cirno settled down quite rapidly after that but still eyed Mokou suspiciously. She wouldn't let anyone bully her friends, particularly while they were sleeping. Light-hearted pranks such as scribbling on faces or using Rumia's shadowy talents to plunge someone into perpetual darkness were perfectly fine, not mean spirited stuff like punching.

Mokou for her part tried to ignore the increasingly irritating fairy while watching out for traps. Without the vampire's exceptional night senses, the exotic Lunarian devices would be much more difficult to avoid, perhaps impossible and that was without factoring in the annoying distractions.

Mokou, who's flaming aura resembled a burning phoenix increased in ferocity as she rocketed between the bamboo stalks, many of which caught aflame in her wake. While Flandre was safely within

the eye of the sun, Cirno wasn't so lucky and beads of pure, icy water rolled down her skin like a winter waterfall.

From Cirno's perspective it felt like she was charging headlong into a seething corona of vivid oranges and reds; a constant explosion without end. It almost blinded her and she looked away, her night vision reduced to a painful blur of bright after-images.

Following the blazing comets trail, Cirno at least could avoid colliding into the bamboo. Of course the heat was almost unbearable but she'd manage, somehow. Flying this close to the fire was dangerous but she wasn't some stupid moth; she was the strongest! Well, at least within the confines of the fairy forest but that was the only important place that mattered after all.

Green moss shifted as several arrows shot up from an ancient mechanical launcher, the simple magic identifying and locking onto Mokou's very distinctive, flaming outline. Out of the corner of her eye, Mokou detected the glitter of something unnatural and held her hand out to incinerate anything foolish enough to challenge her.

The arrows were liquidated in mid-flight, their intricate lunar metals no match for the cleansing fire but their bulbous arrowheads burst nevertheless and released their magic. Nightmarish shapes, monsters and abstract concepts came into existence as the captured dreams of human children were released into the world, made manifest by arcane power.

The more harmless glowing skeletons and ghosts were interspersed with more frightening monstrosities with snapping mouths and all seeing eyes. The limitless horrors brought on by the unrestrained imagination of young minds denied rational thinking. Even compared to the lifeforms that stalked Gensokyo, these things were head, shoulders and in many cases tentacles above them in terms of sheer dreadfulness.

As if that wasn't enough, Mokou heard the sharp twinging of other traps triggering at her presence like a domino effect and knew that

staying in the bamboo forest was suicide. While immortal, dying often hurt like hell, particularly when facing traps specifically designed to stop her, so Mokou soared towards the green canopy and the freedom offered by the night's sky. Cirno automatically followed as if she were an aqua planet orbiting a scorching sun.

Most of the nightmares were purged by rippling flame, unable to touch the hot purity of Mokou's talents but a few of the more resilient monsters managed to close. A ghoulish abomination that looked like a demonic snake wrapped itself around the fairy's leg. It was a small mercy that Cirno couldn't see that most of it's flesh had been burned away but the rancid smell of decaying meat was still much too apparent.

While Mokou was higher up than Cirno, the older girl still felt the disquieting effects. Mokou knew this particular nightmare; an old relic from her earlier years. She was totally alone in her family hut which looked old and decrepit from age. The thatched roofing was flaking away like blades of yellowing grass. A family portrait hung on the wall but Mokou refused to look at it.

The painful knowledge that her immortality had caused her to outlive everyone she had ever held dear had been a constant torment, not least because she hadn't even been able to find Kaguya until recently. But that was then, and this was now. She had ties to this strange magical land of Gensokyo. Friends and acquaintances, annoyances and old rivalries. She had left sorrow behind and failing that, killing Kaguya never failed to brighten her spirits.

Cirno whimpered as all the bad dreams she had ever experience flooded her mind as poisonous thoughts took hold. Losing her friends, seeing them scattered on the wind made her cry out.

Cirno's emotions ran rampant and as a consequence her powers bubbled up to the surface. Glimmering ice glittered brilliantly as the very air was frozen around her, crystallizing many of the horrors in heavy hoarfrost.



Weighted down in equal part by the burden of ice and the fairy's utter conviction to rid herself of these impure, terrible illusions, many of the aberrations dropped out of the dark sky. Frustrated squeals could be heard as they were denied their tasty snack of emotions.

Without that slimy creep leaching off her thoughts, Cirno suddenly felt elated, like all her birthdays had come at once. Her friends were all safe and sound! Their faces would be full of wonder as she painted a masterful picture of this night's exciting events. She wouldn't even have to embellish anything for once.

Her clear blue wings shone with renewed vigour; the reflection pure like her cheerful nature. The dream demons were bathed in her mischievous light and fizzled out, unable to stand such a joyful spirit. Like shadows, they melted back into the night.

Not too far up ahead, Ran waited patiently in perfect relaxation and reclined leisurely on the forest floor. Looking up into the sparse canopy, she drank in the scents and sounds around her like a predator while licking her lips, reveling in the silent anticipation of the hunt.

The nine-tailed fox couldn't help but become caught up in her more feral nature. No longer the perfect servant, now she was a creature of habit rather than refinement. She had disarmed a few of the Lunarian traps; those unnatural things that didn't belong in this forest and certainly not in Gensokyo.

This must be how Yuyuko feels whenever she gets to sate her never-ending hunger, Ran reflected. Her master's missions were a great opportunity to indulge one's self while operating under the guise of servitude.

Multicoloured birds with misshapen beaks roosted for the night up in the branches of a tree.

The hairs on the back of Ran's neck prickled with excitement. Her sharp nails dug into the earth as she imagined how easy it would be

to sneak up on the avian wildlife and feast on mouthwatering, uncooked meat. Ran shook her head, her fluffy tails brushing against her skin as she reminded herself of the mission.

She was Yukari's flawless Shikigami and would carry out her duty to perfection as her master expected nothing less. Still, that wild game did look very tempting indeed.

Ran heard a break in the forest canopy, a rustling of leaves, the distant clicking of devices. Nothing was hidden from her keen senses. Panicked wildlife and other more sinister lifeforms scampered away from the disturbance. The hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention as she took a single, mighty leap and landed atop one of the tallest branches available, her many tails spreading out to help balance her landing.

There they were! She could see all three of them as clearly as a shooting star falling down from the cosmos. Mokou's blazing beacon of light made it easy to pick out all her targets. Not that she needed the additional help. The moon was full with white luminescence and her own eyesight was well used to piercing the darkness in search of elusive prey. This night her prey was a vampire named Flandre.

"As subtle as usual," she whispered before jumping out of the canopy at incredible speeds. Her white hat fluttered wildly as she hurtled herself at the twin fireballs: one coloured a fierce red, the other shining blue. Her long golden tails flattened themselves behind her like nine furry rudders. They helped her control her reckless speed which allowed her to push her maddening velocity to the absolute limit without fear of losing control.

Mokou only had time to register a yellow blur of moment before something hard and fast connected with the underside of her jaw. She grunted, several of her teeth loosened by the unguarded blow. The sleeping Flandre was snatched from her arms. The blazing trail produced by Mokou dissipated as she reeled from the impact but she had seen her fair share of savage scraps in her time and recovered quickly.

Cirno, who's vision was no longer smothered by raging flame struggled to put on the breaks before she barrelled straight into Mokou. Her eyes widened when she noticed that Flandre was no longer safely tucked up within the silver haired girl's arms.

"Where's Flandre?" Cirno exclaimed. "What happened to her?"

Mokou didn't answer. Scatterbrained, it took a lot of concentration to simply stay flying and not drop out of the sky like wild gamebird. A fairy, backlit by a halo of blue light was shouting at her, each word creating a chilly breeze. Something had hit her and taken Flandre, but what exactly? Kaguya, she wondered?

Her neural pathways were aided in recovery by the hourai elixir and within a few seconds, she could think and feel again. The moon loomed over her, a pale giant in the sky. It looked so peaceful and still, the moonlight incredibly calming. Mokou's aching jaw tightened with displeasure. So why was it that she despised such a beautiful sight?

A furious anger overtook Mokou, her internal fires reigniting themselves. The red flames mirrored her state of mind: an intense hurricane on the warpath. Cirno backed away, the heatwave blasting against her skin. Mokou felt like shouting to the heavens, a challenge to whoever had dared to blind-side her like that.

Damned coward!

She noticed a faint set of after-images and looked around to see a flickering yellow speck against the backdrop of total blackness.

That same yellow speck who had put a considerable distance between herself and the angry firestarter was Ran Yakumo who was busy checking her mental map.

Ran scanned the bamboo forest for the clearing her master had indicated. The wind battered against her, resisting her speedy progress. Black clouds of smoke billowed up from small fires across

the otherwise peaceful forest and the smell of burning bamboo was pungent and intoxicating. Flandre and her friends had certainly been busy.

The sight of a nine-tailed Kitsune gliding gracefully down to earth would have been quite an inspiring sight had anyone been around to witness it. Woodsmoke filled Ran's nostrils which conjured up distant memories of hidden opium dens.

Ran pushed the needless sentiments aside. The human world was her past, not the present. Her duty took priority and she needed all her concentration to perform the complex mental equations required to access her master's realm; the boundless world that existed just beyond the visible and even the magical.

You couldn't just clap your hands like witchcraft. No, this required serious, almost superhuman understanding. One small mishap could see you plunged into a never-ending free-fall, the possible destinations as numerous as grains of sand in the hottest desert. Ran always marvelled at Yukari's mastery and wondered if she could ever attain such proficiency. No, Ran's mind was wondering again.

Ran dumped the little troublemaker down at her feet. She looked down at the vampire contemptuously, eyeing up the choice cuts of meat. A nasty bruise had formed on Ran's otherwise perfect skin, a reminder of Flandre's disrespect. You wouldn't see Chen acting in such a manner; she had been raised better than that.

"Say hello to Isabelle Paleflower," she said. Perhaps the two nuisances would take care of each other. Wouldn't that be nice?

Well, enough dilly-dallying. Ran held her hands out and silently began the summoning calculations. Reality warped around her as the dimensional rift opened. Colours became louder and more vivid, scents and sounds were amplified or changed into something else altogether. The dark of night was replaced with the obsidian blackness of unreality.

So caught up in the inner workings and complexities of variation, Ran didn't notice the hurtling mass of molten death flying straight at her. Mokou had caught up faster than expected and she was seriously pissed off and judging by the way she shouted at the top of her lungs, she wanted the world to know.

The fireball screamed as the air around it boiled up to superheated degrees. Ran glowed as if she were dangling just inches from the pool of a sweltering blast furnace. Much to enraged to see sense, Mokou had thrown the liquid death while totally heedless of the potential danger of reducing Flandre to cinders.

Cirno's frantic pleas of restraint didn't temper Mokou's rage one bit. With flickering torches in either hand, Mokou swooped down like a vengeful firehawk on wings of flame.

"No, stop!" the ice fairy yelled as she followed while donning a protective, glittering shield of icicles to protect her delicate skin from the powerful heat waves. Speckles of water glittered away before evaporating completely. Cirno hoped that it would last as she tried to place herself between Flandre and Mokou. She would protect her friend, even from another friend.

"Damned annoyances!" Ran spat.

She was caught in the middle of a very delicate procedure and had absolutely no time to breath. It was impossible to both protect herself and Flandre and while she was loath to save the vampire, failing her beloved mistress was much, much worse.

Bizarre energies ran rampant as both realms bled into each other to create a twisted combination of places that made absolutely no sense. Bamboo blackened and sprouted blinking eyeballs and other mutations. The ground cracked as earthworms suddenly bloated in size, some of which burst in a shower of vile smelling ichor. Skin became transparent and hair colour changed with every irregular heartbeat.

Ran tensed, her lithe body conflicted as instinct fought against her more rational inclination. She could feel her already tenuous hold on things slipping into very dangerous territory so she took the only option available to her. She collapsed the dimensional corridor and hoped that her incomplete preparations had been enough.

Mokou and Cirno were caught up, their beings undone into strands of memories as they were pulled into the maelstrom before it closed up like it had never been there.

## Those in Glass Houses

Flandre awoke with a start as if waking from a particularly nasty nightmare. She grabbed her knees and yawned away some of the sleepiness. The first beams of sunlight were beginning to sully the otherwise beautiful horizon and Flandre snarled at the unwelcome sight. Her slender hands reached for phantom bedsheets that eluded her irritated grasp.

"Sakuya," Flandre mumbled dreamily while rubbing at her heavy eyelids. The younger Scarlet sister intended to severely punish whichever idiot had foolishly opened her bedroom curtains. Sunlight always made her grumpy and she always made it a point to let her displeasure show in often spectacular ways.

You would have thought that the fairy maids would have learned their lesson by now, but alas, those silly little creatures still required correction. Not that Flandre particularly minded of course as any excuse to cause mischief was a welcome relief from her mostly voluntary confinement in the lower levels of the Scarlet Devil Mansion.

Only then did recollection dawn on her and she stood up as if shocked by a jolt of electricity. Anger flooded her vision like a red hazy madness as she remembered her last waking moments but quickly dissipated when she took in her new opulent surroundings.

Flandre found herself standing in the centre of a grand looking but otherwise empty hall. It reminded her of a crystal greenhouse as she beheld the curious design. The mixture of glass and stone rivalled the most beautiful fairytale castles.

Some sections were completely transparent which provided a confusing look into the adjoining rooms while others were made up of more traditional stone. The effect was an optical illusion that

played tricks on the eyes if you looked beyond your immediate surroundings.

Flandre looked up and shielded her eyes as the red orbs beheld a glimmering wall of glass that reflected the sunlight as effectively as a prism. The intricately sculptured grooves provided a beautiful light-show as the captured sunlight bounced around inside the glass structure.

*Sunlight?*

Flandre suddenly felt very weak at the knees which almost caused her to lose her footing. Quivering, she looked more closely at the glimmering glass wall for any signs of witchcraft or trickery. Just because something appeared to be true, it didn't necessarily make it so. Flandre had learned that valuable lesson during her brief exposure to the craziness of Gensokyo.

Flandre's eyes narrowed as she gazed up at the glass architecture that sparkled in the morning rays. No, there was no mistaking this sickening feeling, this instinctive disgust as the light brushed across her skin. How much time had passed while travelling through the gap demon's nightmarish realm?

*There's no way! It's simply impossible! I had plenty of time remaining!*

Vampires possessed an intricate understanding of the darkness and could predict the passing of time as reliably as an hourglass which was why Flandre was so utterly perplexed at the sunlight. She felt like screaming at the top of her lungs, at destroying the sun that haunted her dreams.

Flandre clutched at her shoulders, her face a worried mask. *This wasn't suppose to happen! I still had so much time!* The thought of Remilia discovering her little sister's transgressions horrified Flandre. There could be no harsher deed than losing that bond, that sisterly



love that could only foster between near immortals. *Why are my hands trembling?*

"Oh, looks like the sleeping beauty is finally awake."

Flandre bristled at the voice and looked over to see Mokou casually leaning against a glass pillar. The silver haired immortal regarded her with interest before smirking at the apparent hostility. Flandre's cheekbone still throbbed faintly from where she had been cruelly sucker punched into unconsciousness. It served as a constant reminder of injustice.

"You look pretty happy with yourself, Mokou," Flandre snarled. "Why don't you try hitting me again when I'm expecting it and see what happens?" Flandre held her hands invitingly open, her tenuous hold over her own fierce emotions thinning by the second. The vampire looked dangerous, a sense that only increased with every passing second like a ticking time bomb.

"No need," Mokou replied, apparently unconcerned at the flickering energies illuminating the vampire's threatening red gaze. "The lesson was given, received but apparently not understood judging by that hateful look you're giving me. Don't make the mistake of blowing up again, I'm really, really not in the mood for this."

"How unfortunate," Flandre said without a hint of sincerity. "You should have thought about the consequences before striking me with your dirty, common fingers."

"Oh?" Mokou raised an eyebrow. "You're starting to sound like that haughty bitch Kaguya, just without the maturity. I did promise the little ice fairy that I'd try and get on with you but if you insist on acting childish, then I'll have no problems disciplining you like a naughty toddler."

Flandre narrowed her eyes as that precarious sense of self-control that blanketed her emotions threatened to snap. Wiping away that irritating act of aloofness with a savage beating would do wonders to

restoring Flandre's sense of honour. The atmosphere couldn't have been more murderous as wounded prides clashed.

Peering out from one of the gleaming archways, Ran Yakumo watched the proceedings with no small amount of amusement. It pleased her greatly to see two troublemakers on the brink of tearing each other apart, particularly that little bloodsucking runt. Her nine golden tails were motionless as the Shikigami took in slow deliberate breaths.

While her mental calculations had been so rudely interrupted, Ran had still managed to deliver the troublemaker to the glass palace without any noticeable mutations, missing pieces or time lapses. Reappearing from unreality with half of your body slightly ahead of time is not a pretty experience. It had been a miracle of mental arithmetic and not a single person had witnessed it.

"I'll show you what real fire looks like," challenged the one known as Flandre Scarlet, the little sister of the Scarlet Devil. Ran felt the build up of magical pressure brush up hotly against her skin. It felt invigorating, the power akin to a refreshing wellspring on the brink of overflowing.

It became increasingly difficult to remain hidden as the unstable static discharges tainted the air. The glasswork palace creaked under the invisible strain. Ran almost cried out as the ticklish sensation brushed up against her velvety yellow fur. It felt as if spirits were assaulting her fluffy ears and tails; the energies caressing up and around her incredibly fine strands.

Ran bit down on her tongue lightly to avoid revealing herself in a most humiliating way. The Shikigami was incredulous at the thought of such a stupid thing betraying her presence. Only her master and beloved little Chen knew about her weakness, only they were permitted to touch her in such a familiar manner. The association with pleasant memories only added to the discomfort.

"Intruders!" someone accused.

The voice was unfamiliar as it echoed across the cavernous glass hall. Almost thankful for the distraction, Ran gritted her teeth while carefully peering out from the archway. She grimaced when she realized that it was that hapless winged nuisance Alyssia. While she appeared imposing with her tall, lightly armoured figure, flowing blonde hair and magnificent white wings, Ran knew that the goddess imposter was of no real importance. The more annoying thing was that this self-styled Valkyrie would ruin the potential bloodbath and all the fun that entailed.

Flandre and Mokou both turned in unison to regard the newcomer with icy stares. The open hostility almost made Alyssia bulk under the sheer venomous pressure but she persevered... just. It didn't help that she recognized the shorter, blonde haired one as that dangerous little girl who had possessed a sun stone piece and who had defeated her with contemptuous ease. Still, now was not the time for hesitation. The great Isabelle was relying on her to guard the inner sanctum of the glass palace. Straightening up, she tried to appear as commanding and intimidating as possible.

"You are both intruding on hollowed ground!" she pronounced loudly while wiping the perspiration from her forehead. "State your business or face immediate judgement."

"Shut up!" both Mokou and Flandre snapped.

All the built up resentment and displeasure was released all at once in a blistering heatwave. Like the manifestation of two raging souls, a fierce unseen current knocked Alyssia off her feet as if she weighed nothing at all. Her magical protections and hanging charms did nothing to combat something so little as a simple release of heated emotions.

She wailed manically as the glass wall loomed closer and closer, her own panicked reflection staring right back at her. Alyssia flapped her wings with all her might, those heavenly looking feathers straining to slow the hurtling mass of her body. Smashing into the glass wall at this velocity would be like plunging into a swimming pool filled

completely with gleaming sharp needles. Alyssia whimpered, partly from the speeding wind and partly from her own impending doom.

Flandre blinked as the mental image of an angel filled her troubled mind. The knowledge that she knew this winged being was just enough of a mental spark to knock her out of this tailspin of seething displeasure. Flandre launched herself forwards, her powerful muscles releasing all that pent up anger in one fluid burst of motion.

Much like Sakuya stopping time, Flandre crossed the distance between herself and Alyssia in an instance of impossible speed. Not thinking beyond the immediate, Flandre smacked the speeding woman straight out of the air.

"Is that your idea of a rescue?" Mokou exclaimed. With a simple hand motion the air beneath the falling Alyssia was supercharged with heated magical flashes of fire. Her silver hair billowed out as the room was filled with a thick explosion of steam that filled the entire expanse in an instant. Alyssia grunted as she smacked into the stonework ground, the cloudy cushion reducing it to merely painful instead of absolutely crippling.

Ran ducked back inside the archway to avoid the scolding backdraft. The entire room had become obscured with steam much like the hot springs that the Yakumo household occasionally frequented. Alyssia lay on the ground in a coughing heap. Her body ached all over and moving felt like a challenge in itself. She couldn't believe that she had been defeated with the merest glance and after all that intensive training.

Truly she was up against some fearsome individuals which was all the more reason to prevent them from reaching her beloved empress. Alyssia's body protested as she attempted to rise but she persevered all the same. Her beautiful angel wings unfolded themselves which helped to balance out her unsteady limbs. Her lips chanted a calming mantra that her beloved Isabelle had taught her one stormy night when the two of them had been alone. The power

of language filled her with inspirational strength and she rose up with a second wind.

Flandre stood for a moment and listened to the soothing words that reminded her of a lullaby. This creature had a lovely, heavenly voice and as Flandre looked down at those white feathery wings, she imagined a fluffy mattress made of weightless clouds. An ocean of feathers tenderly caressing her as she slipped into sleepy oblivion. Flandre wrenched herself back to the here and now while snarling at her own stupidity. Patchouli would have rightly scolded her for such foolishness, for opening up to the enemies song.

"Stay where you are," ordered Flandre forcefully. When her warning went unheeded, she placed her shoe between those shimmering wings and pressed down. "Ouch, ouch, ouch," Alyssia whimpered as her face kissed against the cold marble surface. Pale light flickered across her fingertips like glittering strands of silk which prompted Flandre to push down even harder.

"Don't even think about using magic," Flandre warned as she leaned down, her mouth creeping into a frightening blackness full of fangs. "I like you better on the ground. Weaklings should know their place."

By this time, the steam had dissipated enough for captive and captor to get a close look at each other. Looking into the vampire's glowing red eyes was utterly terrifying and Alyssia wilted under the intense gaze. A fabled bloodsucking monster wearing the misleading mask of a little girl had her in it's terrible clutches! Not only that, but she looked extremely angry!

"No, please! Don't hurt me! Don't kill me, I beseech you! Have mercy!"

Flandre smirked, her sharp teeth glinting in the reflected sunlight. "Oh, pleading for mercy already? At least give me the chance to do something first." She absolutely loved teasing those beneath her feet, particularly when they provoked her displeasure. That was a

trait she had picked up from Remilia whom she looked up to and loved very much.

"Please, I didn't intend any harm! You must believe me! I was only instructed to investigate the taint!"

"What taint?" snapped Flandre. "I hope that wasn't a veiled insult!"  
*The nerve of these people, and just when I was starting to feel more cheerful.*

"No, no, the dimensional taint of the gap demon! The shadowy eclipse that smothers reality, the cold fingers that strangle away common sense!"

"I'll strangle you if you don't start to make some sense."

Not too far away, Ran Yakumo almost burst out of hiding at the blatant disrespect of her master. Every muscle in her body screamed for vengeance. Instead, she silently fumed, her clawed hands scraping into the smooth glass. She hated the nickname "gap demon" with a fiery passion. Such a gross misrepresentation of Yukari's brilliance.

Flandre spun around, hands held at the ready but relaxed somewhat at Mokou's approach. Mokou looked back impassively, her scornful eyes narrowing at the vampire's twitchy nature. Walking around eggshells summed up the situation nicely and Mokou really didn't have the patience for babysitting.

"So, who's the runt?" Mokou asked, indicating the cowering mass of feathers.

"That's what I intend to find out," Flandre said as she returned her attention to the fallen woman. "I've seen you before, haven't I?" Flandre asked.

She remembered running into this hapless weakling several times already, once during the freezing snowstorm and more recently at

the bamboo forest where she had been captured by the delightful Lunarians. "What's your insignificant name again?"

"M-my name's Alyssia."

Flandre leaned over so closely that Alyssia could feel her warm breath brushing up against the back of her neck. She was so close! Alyssia couldn't help but imagine those deadly fangs as they slowly closed on her exposed skin. "That's a really nice name-such a shame that it belongs to someone who's about to die."

"No, please!" Alyssia pleaded, her sweet voice cracking. "If you kill me, my empress will never forgive you!"

Mokou gave Flandre a concerned look but Flandre shook her head reassuringly. Couldn't that woman tell that she was only playing around? Flandre grinned, returning her attentions to the now prostrating Alyssia who looked positively petrified.

*Perhaps I'm just that convincing of an actor?*

"Where is this place?" Flandre demanded.

"Th-this is the glass palace, the seat of the great Isabelle's power." The merest mention of her master filled Alyssia with a new found confidence. "Surely you've heard of the great Isabelle Paleflower," she proudly proclaimed while still laying pathetically under the vampire's foot. "The dreamer of fairytales? The empress of forgotten memories?"

*Fairytales? That sounds strangely important for some reason...*

"No," Flandre said, her brows furrowing. The beating sunlight was drying up her rapidly diminishing good mood by the second. "I asked where this stupid place was, not who it belonged to! This palace looks like an absurd circus attraction! Is the owner simply that vain - that she requires everyone to gaze upon her like some kind of goddess or perhaps she's just some kind of exhibitionist?"

"How dare you insult my empress!" snapped Alyssia who's blistering defiance only lasted until Flandre reached down and plucked a single white feather out from those shimmering white wings.

"Ouch!"

"Shut up," Flandre said flatly. "Or I'll pluck you cleanly like a chicken. I've seen the fairy maids perform the task cleanly and without flaw but I'll warn you now, I'll probably be more clumsy, perhaps even slip a few times. You wouldn't want that, now, would you?"

The thought of those taloned fingers callously ravaging her angelic wings almost sent the poor Alyssia into a catatonic state. Mokou couldn't honestly decide how serious the vampire was acting and so decided to steer the conversation into something more useful before either Flandre snapped or Alyssia completely turned into a quivering mass of jelly.

"You said this place was named the glass palace, correct? How far is this structure from the bamboo forest?"

Alyssia looked up, hopeful that perhaps the silver haired one would be a little more reasonable. "It should take no more than a half-day's travel. If you let me go I can guide you both back there safely. This place will soon become a battlefield so I suggest leaving post haste."

"Oh, trying to get rid off us, are we?" Flandre accused. *The only forest I care to know about is the fairy forest. I need to get back before sister discovers my absence and this worm isn't helping!*

"No, no, I'm not!" Alyssia pleaded desperately as she felt Flandre press down more forcefully. "Reimu, the fearsome guardian of the Hakurei Shrine will be here shortly, if she isn't here already. This place is dangerous for the unwary so-"

"Reimu?" Flandre exclaimed, the excitement forcing her lips into something approaching a leer. "The red and white will be here?"



The despair of sunlight, of losing her sister's love surged around Flandre, competing with the exhilaration of meeting up with Reimu again. Such conflicting emotions were having a rather curious effect on her wings which flickered weakly like candles in the wind. She tried to not smile but wasn't finding much success.

*This is bad. I really need to calm down.*

Mokou couldn't help but notice. "Are you blushing?" she asked.

"What? No! Don't be ridiculous!"

"Do you admire Reimu or something? Perhaps a childish crush?"

Flandre was almost beside herself at the absurdity of such a claim. "I'll crush you between my fingertips, Mokou, and yes, I do admire the shrine maiden. I want to meet her again, to battle her again while testing out my new spectacular techniques. What could possibly be wrong with that?"

"Whoa, touchy aren't we?" Mokou grinned and held up her hands apologetically. "Looks like I touched a nerve, though that isn't exactly difficult with you." She walked towards the nearest archway. "You shouldn't treat the shrine maiden as a friend. It's her job to exterminate inhuman troublemakers, keep that in mind when you act all starry-eyed towards her."

Flandre pointed at her back accusingly. "Hey, I'm not finished here!" She couldn't help but feel that she was being belittled. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to unleash some potent combination of magic while Mokou's back was turned but let it not be said that Flandre Scarlet was some kind of coward.

"Reimu isn't like that at all! She's like a stern, sarcastic big sister who sincerely cares about us even if she won't admit it. Sister is always welcome at the Hakurei Shrine, despite her nature. She always enjoys her time in the human world."

Once Flandre had started, she found it impossible to stop speaking, if only to prove to herself that her own desires weren't some kind of convenient invention. Flandre attempted to reign in her emotions but the accursed sunlight was robbing her of her senses. Almost on the verge of tears, but not quite, Flandre earnestly continued .

"I've seen enough false smiles, enough broken promises to know when someone doesn't really care. When I show her how much I've grown, perhaps she'll invite me along next time. Besides, if I beat her in a friendly duel, she'll have no choice but to invite me."

"Well, perhaps you'll get that opportunity," said Mokou as she looked around at the myriad of pathways available to them. Formed of glass, the corridors seemed no less like a maze. The simple act of looking was straining her vision so she looked back at the flustered vampire. "Anyway, aren't you concerned for your friend, Cirno wasn't it?"

*Cirno!*

"Of course I'm concerned! We need to meet up with her right away."

Flandre felt her angelic footrest squirming beneath her shoe. Truthfully, she had totally forgotten about her presence, not that Alyssia had much of a spiritual impression to begin with. Crouching down, she prodded the back of Alyssia's blonde hair with one of her claws. "You're going to guide us and be thankful for it, aren't you?"

"Of course, of course, of course!" Alyssia agreed a little too enthusiastically, so much so in fact, that her nodding forehead was actually hitting the marble ground. The apologetic shacking and flapping wings almost toppled Flandre over.

"Hey, stop moving you birdbrain!" Flandre exclaimed as she ducked underneath a feathery wing swipe that swooshed overhead. Irritated once again, Flandre reached down with one hand and effortlessly hauled the larger woman upright before her hysteria brought the whole glass palace crashing around their feet.

"Stop moving... you... idiotic... psychopath!"

Spinning Alyssia around, Flandre held her in place with taloned fingers and leaned in until they were practically face to face. Her warm breath and menacing red eyes finally had the desired effect as Alyssia stood transfixed by the terrifying demonic vision of a vampire's bite.

Mokou found the sight of Flandre standing high up on her tiptoes incredibly amusing and struggled to contain her laughter. Especially so considering how intimidating Flandre was trying to be, but contain it she did. It really wasn't worth provoking yet another tempter tantrum.

When Flandre joined Mokou at the archway, she couldn't help but notice the curious look she received. Mokou just smiled and nodded towards their newly acquired guide.

As they walked the many sparkling hallways and expansive rooms, Flandre noticed quite a few objects of interest. Items strangely familiar and yet different at the same time. One room contained a number of wheeled contraptions that Flandre recognized at automobiles. She remembered the old Victorian, boxed shaped variations from storybooks but these were sleek, shining beasts with tinted black windshields and were formed from colourful, polished plastics.

Another sculptured room appeared to be a library filled with leathery books that smelled of old paper. The natural sunlight illuminated every nook and cranny of the expansive collection. Walking between the large bookshelves, Flandre noticed a number of gossip magazines and newspapers piled up on a small table. Picking one up at random, she flicked through the pages.

The articles were mostly human-world hearsay, horoscopes and celebrity news. Flipping through the pages, Flandre recognized very little. The television guide seemed like an unsolvable riddle of squares without any reason whatsoever. She blushed at some of the

revealing female outfits which were richly captured in vivid, full colour photos. Without a single frilly hat, elaborate dress nor parasol in sight, Flandre felt quite out of place.

*Has the human world changed that much?*

Placing it carefully back down, Flandre glanced at a rather amateurish looking publication that proudly proclaimed that it featured exclusive stories by the much celebrated journalist Aya Shameimaru. Inside was a listing for "Top ten famous humans gapped into Gensokyo" while on the next page was a survival guide for navigating Yuuka Kazami's sunflower garden.

Flandre gasped at the candid panty-shot gallery in which you matched the face to whichever piece of lingerie belonged to which Youkai. Even with the portraits covered with black bars, Flandre could have sworn one of the victims was a very much asleep Hong Meiling sprawled out behind a bushy tree.

*Those red - how shocking...*

"Hey, bookworm," Mokou called impatiently. "Are you done yet?" Flandre scowled before returning the publication back down upon the table. Figuring that a room filled with books would probably be the least likely place to find a hyperactive ice fairy like Cirno, she left the library.

As they walked down another irritatingly warm and sunshine filled corridor, Flandre found herself sorely missing the refreshing cool touch of midnight. Daylight wouldn't kill her outright but it would significantly weaken her over a protracted period of time. The blessing of light was very much like a slow acting poison to a vampire. With every step on the marble flooring, Flandre imagined her strength fading away until she could barely breathe.

"So, Alyssia" Mokou said. "What's the fascination with human memorabilia? It seems like every single room is stacked with the stuff."

Alyssia glanced nervously back at Flandre before she answered. The vampire just smiled back at her, relishing her discomfort. "The Empress wishes to be prepared and knowledgeable when we return to reality. Keeping up to date on human traditions is only natural."

"Reality, huh? This place is real enough," said Mokou, her foot tapping the floor.

"This place is nothing but a wonderland, a fairytale that we cannot escape."

"Where is my friend?" Flandre demanded loudly, unable to contain herself any longer. "We should have seen or heard something by now." Barely conscious of her actions, Flandre grabbed Alyssia's wrist and squeezed tightly. "I swear, if something's happened to her, you'll be the first one to answer for it."

"P-please," Alyssia whimpered, her skin turning alabaster pale. "I haven't done anything wrong!" She backed away as if physically repelled by Flandre's displeasure which was a distinct possibility considering that Mokou could actually feel the seething anger boiling just under the surface.

"Settle down," warned Mokou. "Harming our guide isn't very wise, is it?"

"What guide?" Flandre snapped. "I've been keeping track of our location and haven't detected the faintest traces of life. No fairies, no nothing." Her crimson gaze turned positively murderous and while there was no magic or trickery involved, her expression alone almost caused Alyssia to pass out. "In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if our friend here was leading us into a trap."

"I've d-done everything... you've asked," Alyssia stammered. Whimpering to herself, the angel-like backed away until her wings pressed up against the wall. "I cannot take this madness any longer!" she screamed. Sweat beaded down over her pounding chest. Flandre reached for her, those sharp claws moving towards her soft,

delicate flesh. Trapped; she was trapped with this monster in sheep's clothing!

Alyssia screamed, the high-pitched sound shattering the overhead glass which cascaded downwards like glittering raindrops. Flandre cursed as she beheld the curtain of falling sharpness and rushed away from it. It reminded her of one of Sakuya's spell card, an endless stream of knives attacking you from every conceivable angle. At least in this case Flandre only had to worry about danger from above. The few fragments of glass that neared her were harmlessly flicked away by her long, sharp fingernails.

Unable to even think rationally, Alyssia's hands glowed with brilliant swirling energies. Two glowing spheres of almost polar opposite colour were slowly crushed within her fingers. Her hysterical mind wanted nothing more than to escape which was an extremely dangerous way to handle chaotic magic. Turning yourself into a frog was often one of the more favourable outcomes.

As such, the unstable forces shot out from her palm with an ear-splitting whoosh of crackling force. The shining twin beams created a deadly crossfire of change as they rebounded between the falling glass shards like an indoor game of laser tag. The explosion of vivid shades and shapes dazzled Mokou who had been shielding herself from the glass with an umbrella of blistering flames.

Some of the glass fragments morphed into miniature mockeries of Alyssia which all wailed in her familiar, heavenly voice. They attacked anything that moved, living or dead. Flandre snarled as she savagely backhanded one away before blasting several others back into superheated glass but the bewitching verses of song were steadily chipping away at her sanity.

Meanwhile Mokou had to contend with a resounding cacophony of screeching icicles, howling fireballs and unnatural Gensokyo weather that all combined itself into a maddening death trap. Her face was awash with cascading colours as everything around her went completely crazy. Mokou grunted as she hit the floor, rolled around

and bathed the glittering storm in her own version of passionate, blazing hell.

Flame lances laced with magical lightening pounded at Mokou's fire relentlessly. Dust storms made up of volatile particles smashed into each other, each impact berthing a perverse new colour or sound that really shouldn't exist. Mokou's arms strained under the pressure of maintaining her fire-shield. Some of her long silver hair that lay on the edge was singed and burned away, the smoke actually intensifying as a trace amount of immortality fuelled the magical inferno.

"That's enough!" Mokou yelled and clapped her hands together, the loud outpouring of total denial cancelling out much of the rouge energies. "Begone!"

Without the intricate words to control this wild, aimless arcana, Mokou simply shouted it down while cleansing it with her unwavering, eternal flame. From her viewpoint, she was looking up while at the centre of some cataclysmic storm. It was a breathtaking sight but sadly not one that she could readily enjoy, what with all the sizzling, exploding and colliding going on.

Bright flashes occurred as her fire strangled out the very life of the aimless spells. Mokou didn't even flinch as the roasting heat licked dangerously close to her face. Smothering it, her blazing flames systematically crushed each and every dangerous creation before burning it away in a cloud of multicoloured smoke.

Not too far away, Flandre slashed out with her claws in a deadly arch that shredded the doppelgängers, her sharp talons a blur of movement. She hated these things, hated their holy verses that caressed her mind with whispers and seemingly good intentions. Her red eyes shone menacingly as she dodged and leapt over shimmering pockets of uncertainty created by the mischievous magic.

During Flandre's home-schooling, Patchouli Knowledge had lectured her at great length about the possible dangers of undirected magic. One wrong misstep might tear away part of your precious psyche or perhaps just decimate the surrounding area while screeching violins assaulted the ears. Patchouli had been almost suicidally depressed after Flandre had mistakenly denied the sorceress' sense of joy one time.

Flandre landed on all fours like a cat ready to pounce. The air above Flandre was still alive with vivid splotches and crackling discharges that struck out in all directions. While the after-images had been dealt with, the power that had birthed them still remained. As if to illustrate that fact, the merest flicker of heliotrope purple transformed a patch of glass into an unstable portal into another realm.

Eiki Shiki, the judger of souls, looked up from her mountain of paperwork at the swirling portal that had suddenly appeared in her otherwise peaceful courthouse. The purples and blues flashed across her rod of remorse which was currently holding down a pile of flapping documents.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded.

Flandre actually took an involuntary step backwards when this divine being took notice of her. Those piecing blue eyes watched her like a hawk. While Flandre had no idea who this person was, she suddenly felt very small, like a mortal looking up with wonder as the shining heavens were slowly revealed.

While the sight was striking, inspirational even, Flandre wanted no part of this unsettling glimpse into the afterlife. Breathing in with all her might, Flandre used her very nature as a vampire to suck in all the stray magic before it did something else unpredictable.

It tasted horrible and blissful at the same time and Flandre's eyes watered as a thousand different flavours flooded her taste-buds. The magical energy charged her wings like a lightning rod and soon they were fiercely glowing like a series of neighbouring suns. The



many fantastical sights and sounds steadily dissipated as Flandre feasted on that which sustained them.

With a loud clap, the portal and many other curious anomalies snapped out of reality with varying effects. Back in the courthouse, the swirling gateway's dismissal produced a sudden gust of wind which in some cruel twist of fate knocked over an ink pot on the Yama's desk. Eiki gasped in horror as a creeping pool of blackness poured all over her important, handwritten documents that had taken hours of her precious time to write and compile.

"Wh-why? Eiki whimpered, her trembling hand releasing her trusted quill which dropped down onto the desk. "Why did... such a thing happen?"

Then her expression hardened as she slammed open the uppermost draw and pulled out her trusty ledger of souls which contained all the mischievous and downright sinful crimes that required her stern judgements.

"I'll never forget this transgression!" Eiki snapped as she flipped through the practically limitless number of pages until she stabbed down her finger on one particular name.

Mokou jumped back onto her feet and roared her displeasure when she noticed that Alyssia was no longer with them. Her fingers itched for someone to purge with righteous flame. Bright fires flickered in between her clenched fingers like dragons breath.

"I'll roast that birdbrain until she's a blackened husk!" Mokou blustered, her footsteps actually warm enough to leave smouldering impressions in the marble flooring. Her footwear, of course, remained unaffected.

"Hey, wait," Flandre said as Mokou began running down the glass corridor. "Where exactly do you think you're going without me!"

"Where you do think?" Mokou called back behind a swathe of silver hair. "If you don't want to be left behind, then get a move on!"

Flandre hesitated only for a moment before taking off in pursuit of Mokou. As she ran, her eyes noticed a number of large, celestial feathers that shimmered gloriously in the sunlight.